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By CHUCK MARTIN

YOU CAN'T STAY ON TOP

A Rodeo Novelet

By JOHN C. ROPKE

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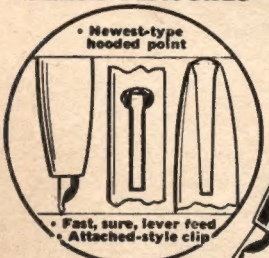

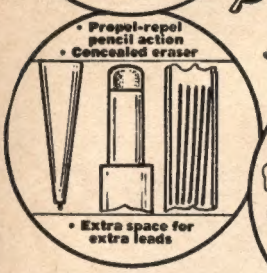

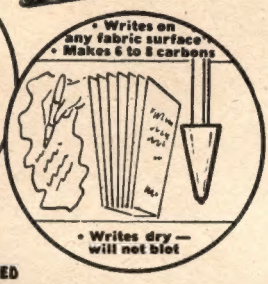

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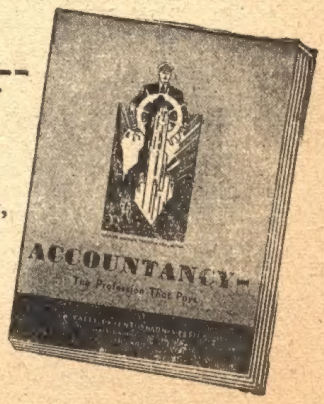

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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

Vol. XXIII, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION April, 1948

COMPLETE NOVEL

Lure of the Gun Trails

by Chuck Martin

Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk declare range war on Twins McFee! Follow the Masked Rider as he defies a sinister ring of grim marauders that encircles Purgatory Valley, ruthlessly dedicated to dealing destruction and death! 13

COMPLETE NOVELET

YOU CAN'T STAY ON TOP *by John C. Ropke* 60

Eddie Brady, the cowboy from Canada who claims he can show Montana riders a trick or two, challenges the bronc-stomping honors of modest Ray Lucas!

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Sharp-witted Marshal Lowell brings the sting of justice to an evil killer

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An imaginative button leads hard-bitten hombres away from the path of fear

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For once Shoo-Fly, Puggy and Ike do something that pleases Sheriff Bates

SHADOW OF THE DEVIL *by Archie Joscelyn* 91

In the frozen wastes of the Canadian wilds, a struggle for survival rages

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Scout Judd Stockton must choose between death for himself—or a friend

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A department for readers conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., 9 South Clinton St., Chicago 6, Illinois, executive and editorial offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President.

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Subscription (12 issues), $1.80; single copies, 15 cents. Foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter December 16, 1937, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution be used it is a coincidence. Printed in the U.S.A.

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HI WADDIES, grab yourself a cayuse and let's be off on another trail jaunt and another trail talk. It's fine riding these cool, crisp mornings, when there is a little frost in the air. It usually makes the horses feel like cutting up a bit, or say, letting off a little steam. Most times horses do not get enough exercise in cold weather and they are very much like children, deprived of that exercise they are a little apt to overdo the first opportunity to cut up a bit.

Horses that are rough broken are more apt to start bucking on a cool morning than the gentle-broken ones, and in case you don't know the difference between rough-breaking and gentle-breaking, we will give out with a little on these two methods of breaking saddle horses.

Rough-breaking is the old style way of breaking horses, the style that was in vogue when there were so many horses to be broken that ranchers did not have the time to devote special attention to any one horse. In those day they used to round up quite a herd of horses, drive them into a corral, and cowboys would rope, saddle and ride one horse after another practically all day long—and brother, if you don't think it's hard work, just go out to some ranch and put in a full day bucking horses and you won't have to be rocked to sleep at night. If the bumps and bruises will let you sleep you will sleep like a babe, because you will be dog tired.

The Rough-Breaking Method

The object in rough-breaking was to save time, and it was also about the only way that many knew how to break horses. They would ride a horse and spur him, and any wild horse will buck when he is first saddled and ridden, especially if he is spurred. Hard bucking is also very tiring to a horse, as while they are trying to unseat a rider they are extending themselves to the limit, burning up a lot of energy, and as a horse is ridden and spurred, he bucks until he is tired of bucking, which does not take long.

Then, if he has not rid himself of the rider, he will quit bucking and break into a run. After getting tired of running he will slow to a trot and finally to a walk, but he is still ridden until he is very tired—and if he is a normal horse, he is practically broken. He may buck a few jumps now and then, but ordinarily will give it up as a bad job, as he was unsuccessful in unloading the rider before.

Some people claim that rough-breaking takes away some of the spirit of the horse, more or less breaks his spirit, and in this I am inclined to agree with them. I do not like to see a horse do anything through fear. I like to see one that does a thing because his master has asked or ordered that thing done, and because his master is his friend and protector and he wants to obey that master.

Gentle-Breaking

In this a horse is again very much like a child. No one likes to see a child obey a command or request of its parents because it is afraid not to obey that command, but when the actions of the children show that it is a pleasure to do as they are bidden because the request has been made by their parents whom they honor, respect and love, then it is a beautiful thing, just the same as it is to see a horse perform at the request of its master without having to be whipped, spurred or frightened into obeying.

In gentle-breaking a horse to saddle, the

(Continued on page 8)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

animal is usually taken when a young colt and is petted until he knows that the person is his friend and will not harm him. He is haltered and led around a while each day for several days, then possibly a saddle blanket is placed upon the colt and strapped lightly and the horse is led some more. Finally a saddle is placed upon the colt and he is led around with the saddle upon him, the handler taking particular pains to see that the animal is not hurt in any way. A bridle is put on the horse and sometimes he is driven, hitched to a buggy, with two long reins for guiding and the handler walking behind the horse, until the horse has been made bridlewise before anyone ever mounts him for riding.

It is possible in this art of gentle-breaking, thoroughly to break a horse to saddle without it ever bucking a single jump, and if it were not the best way to break good horses, then ranchers would not take the extra time and trouble to gentle break their horses.

Horses of the King Ranch

Down on the great King Ranch of Texas, they raise some of the finest quarter horses in America, and they break a lot of these horses for use in handling their large herds of cattle. It is a pretty safe bet that right now with the present shortage of beef, the King ranch is running close to fifty thousand head of cattle, and it takes a lot of horses to handle that many cattle.

The King Ranch long since found out that it takes no more to keep a good horse than a scrub, and they have built up the bloodline of their horses until they are the best.

On my last visit to the King Ranch I found some two dozen cowboys gentle-breaking horses or colts. Some were leading the colts around with just a halter, others with a saddle blanket upon them, others with saddles, and a few were riding.

These cowboys would work with a horse an hour or so, then tie the horse in the shade and a group of the cowboys would indulge in a game of cards, then would resume their leading and handling of the horses, taking care not to get the horses tired of the treatment. If one of those cowboys would ever let one of those horses buck with him, or in any way encourage bucking, I am sure

(Continued on page 10)

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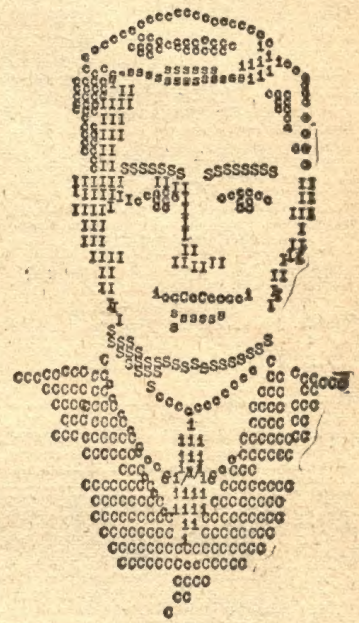

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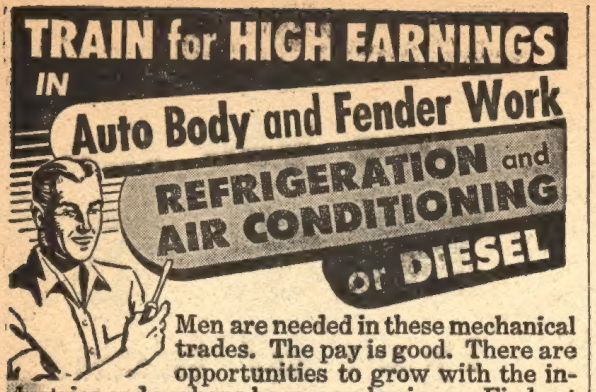

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

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(Continued on page 103)

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WONDERFUL! I'LL SEND A REPAIR CREW FOR THE PLANE TOMORROW

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SAY! YOU MUST BE SANDY OLTNER, THE FLYING FIGURE SKATER!
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THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE TO ORDER FOR TOUGH-BEARDED GENTS

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The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk declare range war on dread outlaw Twins McFeel

CHAPTER I

The Bloody Strip

ROB RANSON lifted his deep-chested mountain horse into a dead run when he heard the flat whipping bark of a heavy rifle. Rafter R range ran to the very edge of the lava badlands, and that one shot told him there was trouble at the deep waterhole which meant life to the range cattle on the high desert.

Ranson stopped his horse in a fringe of buckthorn, ground-tied the bay with his left hand, while his right slapped for the heavy six-shooter tied low on his leg. A Rafter R rider was down on his back at the margin of the *cienaga*, and he struggled to sit up just as a wide-shouldered man left a nest of rocks and started toward him, a rifle ready in his big brown hands.

Wayne Morgan Defies the Evil Ring of Grim

Ranson shouted just as the rifleman shifted the long gun to his shoulder. Then he thumbed a shot from his six-shooter when the rifleman whirled to snap a shot at him. The flat Stetson flew from Ranson's head with the bark of the rifle which was flung out when its owner unhinged at the knees and sprawled face-down among the rubble.

Ranson stepped back behind the brush screen with his smoking six-shooter eared back for another shot. He reached for his hat, pushed it above the brush on the muzzle of his gun, and waited. A moment later he came into the open, ignored the bush-whacker, and ran in a crouch to the Rafter R hand who was sitting up, but weaving back and forth from bullet shock.

"Rawhide, you hurt bad, feller?" Ranson called to the old cowboy who still clung to his hand-gun.

"Got me high in the left side," Rawhide Clancy muttered slowly. "That outfit is sleepering our calves, boss. I ran across two weaners with the old cows, and then that barn-shouldered hombre cut me down from the bresh!"

"That was Tug McBride," Ranson said quietly. "One of the McFee gang."

"He dead?"

"I never throw off my shots when a gent has a gun turned on me," Ranson said coldly. "I'll put a plug in that bullet hole of yours, get you on your horse, and we'll head back for the Rafter R."

CLANCY nodded his grizzly head. He made no sound while Ranson fashioned a cloth plug from the old cowhand's shirt-tail, inserted it into the ugly wound, and made a crude shoulder bandage.

"It's come, boss," Clancy said wearily. "You've killed yourself an outlaw, and Twins McFee won't take no rest now. They'll come to the Rafter R shore as sin!"

Rob Ranson straightened up and stared for a long moment across the lava rocks which marked the border of the badlands. Six feet tall, with wide shoulders, lean hips, and the speed of a panther. Blue eyes that stared into the blinding desert waste without winking. His voice a low flat whisper of sound when he spoke.

"All I want is a chance to meet Twins McFee for an even break. A pulse hammers in my fingertips every time I think of that killing son, but he's the fastest of his breed!"

"Like I said, and McFee would give his right arm to meet you for a powder-smoke showdown," Clancy answered. "Better lead my hoss up, Rob. It's six miles back to the Rafter R!"

Ranson nodded and led up a hip-shot bay. He boosted Clancy to the saddle, handed him the whangs, and walked beside the wounded man to his own bay. He mounted up, rode beside Clancy at a walk, and they headed for the Rafter R.

"Twenty-five years I've been on the Rafter R payroll," Clancy murmured drowsily. "I signed on the year before you were born. If those owlhooters jump us, you light out for the spread to warn the boys!"

They rode a slow mile with Ranson supporting the wounded man in the saddle. A hammer of hoofs turned both men toward the sounds, and Ranson's right hand slipped down to his holstered gun. He relaxed when he recognized the big shoulders and young silky black beard of the oncoming rider.

"That's Mormon Blaine's son," Rawhide muttered. "Young Brad won't be much help, boss."

"Brad Blaine will fight," Ranson corrected. "It's his father who is a man of peace."

Brad Blaine reined in to the pair and nodded when he saw the bloody bandage across old Rawhide's chest. Twenty years old, strong as a bull, razor had never touched his cheeks. His beard was soft and silky, and matched the color of his narrowed eyes.

"Solo Frayne is riding this way as soon as he rounds up his outlaw hands," Blaine said. "He found Tug McBride down at the water-hole, and he swore to burn down the Rafter R. I was hiding in the brush on the north side, and you better light a shuck for yore spread, Rob. I'll take Rawhide over to the Two B with me!"

"I can make out," Clancy muttered. "You ride with Rob and help him fight off those rustling outlaws!"

"It's Mormon," Blaine murmured with lowered head. "He allows he's a man of

peace, and won't join yore organization, Ranson."

"He'll have to join now," Rob Ranson said fiercely, and then he studied Clancy's weathered face. "You'll go with Brad?" he asked hopefully.

"I'll go," Clancy promised. "You fan that hoss of yores down the hind legs and get long gone. Tell the boys to drill 'em on sight."

threatens to burn out the Rafter R. Tell Curt Caldwell to send me what help he can spare!"

"I'll tell him," Marian Caldwell promised, and galloped away to give the warning.

RANSON gigged his lathered horse with a blunted spur and rode into the Rafter R yard. His three-man crew

WAYNE MORGAN

Rob Ranson nodded and was away at a dead run. This was showdown between the outlaws and the cattlemen, and Ranson knew that it would be a battle to the finish. The cattlemen of the Strip couldn't stand any more losses, and unless they banded together for their mutual protection, the McFee gang would wipe them out one by one.

Ranson was nearing his own gateway when a rider cantered through the big gate. A pretty girl called a greeting, and Ranson caught her hand and spoke jerkily.

"Ride and warn yore father, Marian. Tug McBride shot old Rawhide Clancy, but I settled for McBride. Now Solo Frayne is rounding up the gang, and he

were at the dinner table, and they came to the door when they heard the clatter of hoofs. All three were in their late twenties, and Sam Johnson asked about Rawhide Clancy.

"Rawhide was wounded down at the *cienaga,*" Ranson explained hurriedly. "But Tug McBride won't bushwhack another man. Now Solo Frayne is leading his renegades here to burn us out. You boys get yore rifles, and plenty of cartridges. We'll stand them off until we get some help!"

Dinner was forgotten as the three men left the kitchen and ran to the bunkhouse. Tom Tucker and Tad Fowler carried Winchesters in their capable hands, while Sam Johnson patted the stock of

his thirty gun. Rob Ranson had formed his plans, and he gave day orders swiftly.

"Sam, you get up in the barn loft and cover the yard and those haystacks. You, Tucker, guard the back of the barn from the tack room. Fowler and I will be in the house, and remember, every man in that wolf pack is a cold-blooded killer!"

A moment later the big yard was deserted. Rob Ranson piled a heavy table in front of a wide front window in the stout log house, and then he took his position behind it where he could watch the yard from the big front gate. The noon hour droned away, and then a shot cracked from the barn loft.

"They're riding an Injun circle around the yard, boss!" Sam Johnson called the warning. "Must be at least a dozen of 'em!"

Several rifles blasted from a jack-pine thicket on the west side of the yard. The outlaws had taken cover in the thicket, and glass shattered in the big front window as slugs bit into the stout oak table.

Ranson smiled grimly and fined his sights. A hoarse yell greeted his first shot, and the battle was on. The outlaws were attacking from three points, but the stubborn defenders kept them pinned to cover with a savage cross fire.

Ranson figured there were at least six men hidden in the jack-pine thicket, and he reached for a pair of old field glasses when the outlaws changed the course of their fire. They were shooting toward the west, and Ranson smiled grimly when he saw the reason.

Four riders were coming from the direction of the Triangle C, and they found cover behind boulders and in buffalo wallows to return the fire of the McFee gang. Ranson thought of the Double B which carried a crew of ten men, and then he shook his head. Mormon Blaine was a man of peace, and the Double B was across the line in Utah. Only four miles across the line, but the Mormons would not fight unless they were attacked.

Ranson turned to stare when a streak of sparks flashed out from the nest of rocks nearest a big haystack of winter hay. It was almost fifty yards from the stack to the hiding place of the outlaws, and the fiery streak fell to the ground. Ranson muttered angrily as Fowler ran in from the kitchen.

"They're trying an old Indian trick!" Ranson told Fowler. They've got a bow and arrows, and they're going to fire that haystack with burning arrows. We've got to pin them down, Tad!"

Ranson spaced his shots and told Fowler to stand by. Then he reloaded while Fowler took up the battle. A second arrow whizzed in a high arc from the nest of rocks, and Ranson groaned when the missile found its mark.

A yell went up from the outlaws when the dry hay burst into flames. A little plateau rose up behind the nest of rocks, and Ranson cursed himself for stupidity. A guard up on the little mesa would have commanded the nest of rocks, but now it was too late.

THE FIRE from the outlaws in the trees was directed against the Triangle C men, and not an outlaw exposed himself. Ranson clenched his teeth and stared at a second haystack toward the north, but only a scant fifty yards from the renegades behind the nest of rocks. The Rafter R would be in a bad way if they lost any more winter feed.

"That's for Tug McBride!" a hoarse voice shouted. "The next one will learn you who's boss!"

"That's Twins McFee himself, boss!" Fowler told Ranson. "They're trying to fire that other stack, and then they'll try for the barn!"

Rob Ranson leaped to his feet and laid his rifle aside. His right hand slapped for the heavy Colt .45 in his holster, and then he realized his helplessness. Any man who showed himself would be killed by the ruthless outlaws who had placed the defenders accurately. There might be another way. Ranson lifted his deep voice in a roaring bellow.

"You're a sneaking coward, McFee! You claim to be fast, but you shot all yore victims on a sneak!"

The shooting stopped as every man waited for the reply of Twins McFee. This was something personal; something a man could get a hold of. The answer came in a stern powerful voice.

"I'll give you satisfaction, Ranson. When we burn the Rafter R to the ground, you won't be so busy. You can look me up, and I'll give you a fair shake!"

"Make it now!" Ranson shouted back. "The Strip ain't big enough for both of us!"

"I can wait!" McFee answered arrogantly. "I've got nothing to lose, and you have. Fire that other stack!"

Rob Ranson listened and ground his

As the fist landed solidly on McFee's jaw, the Masked Rider saw the outlaw's knees buckle (CHAP. VII)

teeth in futile rage. He had tried to organize the neighboring cattlemen, and a meeting had been called at the Triangle C for that very night. Now it was too late, and Twins McFee could fight each ranch separately.

Another flaming arrow hissed out from the nest of rocks and sped toward the second haystack. It fell short a few yards, and Ranson emptied his rifle at the high nest of rocks. Then he drew back and cupped the glasses to his eyes, and a grim smile spread across his face.

Standing on the plateau, shielded from the west by a huge boulder, a tall man stood with a rifle at his shoulder. A black domino mask covered the stranger's eyes, and a flowing black cape hung from his wide shoulders. An outlaw gasped when the stranger's rifle spat flatly, and Rob Ranson shouted the news to cowboys and outlaws alike.

"The Masked Rider!"

"Don't pick up that bow!" a cold stern voice spoke clearly, and without effort. "Next time I won't throw off my shot!"

"Fire that stack!" Twins McFee roared. "That Masked Rider is wanted by the law the same as we are!"

"Not the same!" came the instant contradiction. "I never shot a man in the back, or burned down an honest man's outfit!"

A shot blasted out from a rock behind the big log-and-sod barn. The Masked Rider's rifle spoke again, and a scream of mortal agony told of his unerring accuracy.

"Ride off, McFee!" the Masked Rider warned coldly. "Blue Hawk has one of yore men under his gun, and you can't win!"

"I'll tally for you and the redskin!" McFee shouted hoarsely. "And I'll get Ranson if it's the last thing I do!"

The Masked Rider made no answer, and Ranson could hear the rattle of saddle-gear as the outlaws mounted behind cover. Then the four men from the Triangle C came roaring into the yard, and Rob Ranson ran outside and stared at the little plateau with his lower jaw sagging.

THERE he could see a tall lean rider far away on a black horse, silhouetted against the sky-line. He was staring at the man who had saved the Rafter R when Curtis Caldwell slid his horse to a stop near the burning haystack.

"What happened?" the old cattleman demanded. "They had us pinned down, and we could see the fire. Can't save that stack now," and then he followed Ranson's staring eyes.

"That black hoss and long black cape," Caldwell murmured. "That must be the—Masked Rider!"

"Yeah," Ranson said in a whisper. "He was standing up there on that little mesa, and he winged the hombre who was shooting those burning arrows. I'd have been burned out if he hadn't come when he did, and now mebbe you see what I mean."

"I'm an old fool, but I'll join now!" Caldwell promised fervently. "It's just like you said, Rob. We can't fight this gang of killers alone. United we stand; divided we fall! One by one!"

"Send a man over to talk to Mormon Blaine," Ranson said wearily. "I know he's a man of peace, but he has as much to lose as the rest of us. Let's get down there behind the barn and see who that dead rustler is."

Sam Johnson came from the barn, and two other cowboys joined their young boss. The grim-faced procession rounded the barn and headed for a big boulder, and Ranson leaned down and turned the dead man over to study the still face and sightless staring eyes.

"Hey, boss, this hombre is no outlaw!" Sam Johnson spoke up quickly. "That's Jig Fennessy of the S Bar C. He works for Sam Clanton!"

"I know him," Ranson said thoughtfully. "And Sam Clanton rods his spread right there at the edge of the badlands. Never seems to lose any stock, and I reckon this tells us why!"

"You mean Clanton is in with the McFee gang?" Caldwell asked, and he stroked his long white mustaches as he slowly shook his head. "Clanton ships stock from Purgatory just like the rest of us," he argued stubbornly.

"He does, but what about Fennessy here?" Ranson countered. "He was shooting at us, and helping the McFee gang. He was likewise drawing his pay from Sam Clanton!"

"There might be a difference there, Rob," Caldwell spoke slowly. "Sam Clanton wouldn't dare throw in with us on account of the location of the S Bar C. Those outlaws would clean him out pronto. I've heard him say he looks the other way if he loses a few head of saddle-stock. He says McFee would take them

regardless, and it is cheaper to pay tribute than lose his whole outfit."

"He's always got plenty of money, I know that," Ranson agreed. "I've sold him cattle, and so have you, Curt."

"When I needed cash," Caldwell said with a nod of his white head. "How bad was old Rawhide Clancy hurt?" he asked with kindly sympathy.

"Bad, but not mortally," Ranson replied, and then he turned to watch a rider coming through the gate. The man was a stranger, but he sat his roan horse like a working cowboy. He rode straight up to the group and spoke quietly to Rob Ranson.

"You'll be Ranson of the Rafter R, and my name is Wayne Morgan. I was heading over thisaway from Utah to see if you needed any hands, and I met up with old Rawhide Clancy!"

"You met Rawhide?" Ranson repeated. "You talked to him and Brad Blaine?"

"They rode back with me," Morgan answered dryly. "You see, Ranson, old Rawhide had passed out from that wound of his, and Blaine had to take him from the saddle. I was up on the rimrock watching when a long-jointed gent dropped a noose around Blaine's neck and liked to choked him to death!"

Ranson glanced down at the gun on Morgan's right leg. Smilingly Morgan drew it out for his inspection. The barrel was smoke-grimed, and Ranson asked a question.

"You kill this long-jointed roper?"

Wayne Morgan nodded as his blue eyes searched Ranson's face. "Didn't have time to wing him," he explained coldly. "This S Bar C killer was fixing to break Blaine's neck!"

"You said S Bar C?" Caldwell interrupted.

"That's the brand his horse wore, and Blaine said this hangman was an hombre by the name of George Bowdie!" Morgan answered.

"I know Bowdie, or at least I did," Ranson corrected himself, and then he started for the house when Brad Blaine came through the gate holding old Rawhide Clancy in the saddle.

WAYNE MORGAN looked over the big yard while Ranson and his crew carried Clancy into the house. A cowboy mounted a horse and started for the little town of Purgatory to get the doctor, and Ranson found Morgan waiting at the tie rail when he came out of the house.

"I need a hand to take Rawhide's place," Ranson said quietly. "You look capable."

"Make it fighting pay, and you've hired a hand," Morgan said quietly.

Ranson nodded. "A hundred a month and shells," he stated, and watched Morgan's rugged face. "Looks like you've already started to work," and he glanced downward toward the smoke-grimed gun. "Do you know anything about a gent called the Masked Rider?"

"I've heard of him," Morgan answered carelessly. "Travels with an Indian name of Blue Hawk. Why do you ask?"

"The Masked Rider saved the Rafter R not more than an hour or two ago," Ranson said gratefully.

"I might as well mount up and ride out then," Morgan said with a rueful smile. "If the Masked Rider is helping you, you won't need me."

"I'll need you," Ranson answered quickly. "It don't lack much to shipping time, and I've a gather of beef to make. I've also got a war on my hands. You still want to ride out?"

"Where do I roll my bed, boss?" Morgan asked with a slow smile.

CHAPTER II

Man of Peace

WAYNE MORGAN changed his saddle to a fresh Rafter R horse. He had eaten in the big kitchen, and his blue eyes narrowed as he studied Brad Blaine who was talking earnestly to Rob Ranson. Morgan had an idea as to what was coming when the young Rafter R owner came toward him with his Mormon neighbor.

"I've been thinking, Morgan," Ranson prefaced the request he was about to make. "Young Brad here has seen you work, and I'm sending a man over to talk to his father. This new Rafter R hand would be about your size."

"Fine, now that we've whipped the cat all around the barn," Morgan said with a little smile of understanding. "You can tell it straight from the shoulder to me, Ranson. I'll take orders."

"Knew it," Ranson said with a nod of his head, and now his face was serious. "It's this organization you heard us talking

about," he began grimly. "Unless all the cattle outfits band together to help each other, Twins McFee and his gang will take over the Strip!"

"How far is it over to the Double B?" Morgan asked.

"About seven miles from here," young Blaine spoke up. "The Double B brand is made with the two B's back-to-back, and we are just across the Utah border. We better be getting along."

"I don't have to tell you, but learn what you can of the country, Morgan," Ranson told his new hand. "You might have to work quite a bit on your own."

Wayne Morgan controlled the satisfaction he felt at the announcement. He tightened his latigo, swung up to the saddle, and spoke carelessly.

"You don't know much about me, but thanks, boss. I'll try to earn my pay."

"You saved Rawhide and Brad, and that's enough for me," Ranson admitted frankly. "Tell Mormon what happened, and warn him to be on the lookout. We all sell our steers to Crail Towers, the cattle buyer."

Morgan nodded and left the Rafter R yard with Brad Blaine. As they rode toward the Vermillion Cliffs, Morgan listened while young Blaine told him about the McFee gang, and gave the locations of the neighboring ranches. The range was well watered by little streams, and the grazing cattle were well-fleshed and almost ready for market.

Born and raised in cattle country, Wayne Morgan could read the range like a city man would read a book. He knew that the Triangle C was a big outfit from the number of cattle wearing that brand. The Rafter R was also much in evidence, and then Morgan noticed a difference. He spotted a bunch of cattle that seemed bigger, and all wore the Double B on the left hip.

"Looks like your father is improving his herds," he remarked to Brad Blaine. "Those three and four-year-olds will run better than a thousand pounds."

"That's right, Morgan," Brad Blaine agreed with a pleased smile. "Some of us Mormons have made a study of animal husbandry, and we buy herd bulls to improve the strain of these brush cattle. Solo Frayne will mark you for his own gun, now, Morgan!"

Morgan glanced at his companion at the abrupt change in the conversation. His hands caressed the butts of his guns, and the little cleft deepened in his square chin.

"Solo means this Frayne gunman plays a lone hand when he can," Morgan remarked. "What's he look like in case I cut his sign?"

"Frayne is tall and lean," Blaine described the outlaw. "He's mighty fast with his gun. He has greenish eyes that always seem looking for trouble. Gun-trouble," he added grimly.

Morgan made no reply, but he knew that he would recognize Solo Frayne if they ever met. Like an Indian, Morgan never got lost, and he was making a map in his mind as he rode into Utah with Brad Blaine. He nodded as they rode past level meadows where new-mown hay had been stacked for winter feed, and then they were riding into a big fenced-yard toward a big rambling house.

"This is the Double B," young Blaine said quietly. "That's my father just coming out on the porch, and the cattlemen call him Mormon."

MORGAN nodded without answering. He was studying the big man who watched them ride across the yard. Mormon Blaine wore a full black beard, a flat black hat, and a stern expression on his strong weathered face. Morgan guessed him to be in his late forties; a powerful man who would weigh more than two hundred pounds.

Mormon Blaine was staring at his son with displeasure showing on his strong face. He wore no weapon of any kind. He was staring at the six-shooter his son wore on his long right leg.

" 'He who lives by the sword, shall die by the sword.' " The elder Blaine spoke emphatically. "After this you will dress as we do here in Utah, Bradford!"

"And he'll get killed by a gun," Wayne Morgan said crisply.

Mormon Blaine tightened his lips and turned to face Morgan. "You are a stranger among us, young man," he said slowly. "We Mormons are men of peace!"

"Father, this is Wayne Morgan, and he is riding for the Rafter R," Brad Blaine said quickly. "Mr. Morgan, meet my father."

"Howdy, sir," Morgan answered respectfully. "Rob Ranson sent me over to have a talk with you."

"I am not glad to know you," Mormon Blaine answered frankly. "Yours are the ways of violence, and you are not a good influence for my son!"

Wayne Morgan listened and showed no surprise. He did not try to argue against the stubborn convictions of a man who lived his religious creed as he wore his somber black clothing. He had seen the Mormons down in Arizona, and he remembered that they fought back only when attacked.

"It's Twins McFee, Dad," Brad Blaine said hesitantly. "They are rustling Rafter R stock, and they tried to burn down the house and barns. They did burn down one

"Ride out, stranger!" he ordered sternly. "You are a confessed killer, and we want none of you!"

Wayne Morgan did not move. He studied the angry Mormon and waited for young Brad to speak. Brad Blaine was gently stroking an angry welt on his neck.

"Morgan killed to save my life, father," young Blaine explained in a choked, husky voice, as though he could still feel the strangling noose about his throat.

Mormon Blaine stared at his son and

BLUE HAWK

big haystack before the Masked Rider drove them away!"

"They have not attacked the Double B," Blaine said stubbornly, and then his expression changed to one of curiosity. "The Masked Rider?" he asked his son.

"He is here in the Strip," Brad Blaine answered with an emphatic nod of his head. "With that Indian they call Blue Hawk."

"And he killed a man!" Mormon Blaine said bluntly. "Death rides wherever the Masked Rider rides!"

"I killed a man today," Morgan interrupted quietly. "I'm shore you would have wanted it that way!"

Mormon Blaine filled his big chest with a deep breath as he turned like a cat on Morgan. His dark eyes flashed with anger, and he pointed to the big gate.

saw the welt. "You mean you were hanged by a rope?" he asked slowly.

Brad Blaine nodded. "George Bowdie was fixing to break my neck," he grated. "He was all set for the jerk when Morgan let him have a slug between the eyes!"

Mormon Blaine sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. Morgan caught Brad's eye and shook his head for the youngster to remain silent. At last Mormon Blaine opened his eyes and spoke reproachfully.

"You did something first to anger Bowdie," he accused his son. "Tell me all about it!"

QUIETLY Morgan listened while Brad Blaine told of the shooting of old Rawhide Clancy. He watched the changing expressions on Mormon Blaine's heavy face, and when Brad had finished, the

elder Blaine stared out across the broad plains toward the distant mountains.

"This comes because you did not stay here in Utah where you belong," he chided his son. "And George Bowdie was one of Sam Clanton's riders." He changed quickly as he watched a rider spurring toward the big yard. "You will leave at once, Mr. Morgan," he said harshly. "Before Sam Clanton sheds blood on the Double B!"

Wayne Morgan turned his horse and watched the oncoming rider. He twitched the gun in his holster from force of habit as he studied the S Bar C owner, and made no move to obey Mormon Blaine's harsh order.

Sam Clanton was in his early forties, smooth-shaven, and dressed for his work. His clothing was rough for work in the badlands brush, and he wore a .45 six-shooter on his right leg. Wide-shouldered and lean of flank from long hours in the saddle, with the dominant quality of a leader who was accustomed to being obeyed. He slammed through the gate and slid his horse to a stop near the three men, but his piercing black eyes stared steadily at Wayne Morgan.

"You killed one of my hands, stranger!" he accused bluntly. "Now you better talk fast!"

"You're doing the talking," Morgan answered quietly. "And you were talking fast!' he added meaningly.

"I'm Sam Clanton of the S Bar C," Clanton introduced himself savagely.

"I'm Wayne Morgan of the Rafter R," Morgan answered in the same tone.

"You killed George Bowdie!" Clanton said in a harsh rasping voice. "I'm listening!"

"Sounds like you might listen to reason, putting it that away," Morgan drawled. "Take a look at that mark on young Brad's throat. Bowdie dropped a noose over Brad's head, and was fixing to break his neck on a sneak. That's why I killed Bowdie!"

"Young Brad was playing in with Rob Ranson!" Clanton answered angrily.

"Hang and rattle a spell," Morgan said softly, but there was a warning in his low humming voice. "You mean to say you are playing in with the McFee gang?"

"I'm playing in with nobody!" Clanton roared. "Frayne said you pulled down on Bowdie without giving him a chance!"

"You mean Solo Frayne?" Morgan asked pointedly. "That outlaw who is *segundo* to Twins McFee?"

Mormon Blaine cleared his throat and spoke in his deep rumbling voice. "You men will both leave my land. I am a man of peace, and I mind my own business!"

Sam Clanton bared his teeth and backed his horse a few steps. His right hand hovered above the grips of his gun, and his little eyes were blazing with killer-light as he rapped a challenge at Morgan.

"Draw, you sneakin' sidewinder! You never gave Bowdie a chance!"

Wayne Morgan dipped his hand down and up with effortless ease. His six-shooter was out and cocked for a shot before Sam Clanton's weapon had cleared leather. Morgan held his shot and spoke tersely.

"You heard Mr. Blaine, Clanton. He wants no war on the Double B; and you'd better ride on out!"

Sam Clanton dropped his hand away from his gun as he turned his sweating horse. All the murderous savagery had fled from his hard face, and a trace of fear could be seen in his little eyes. He nodded and rode through the gate without a word, and when he was out of sight, Morgan turned to Mormon Blaine.

"I am not a cold killer, Blaine," he said slowly. "Rob Ranson believes that Clanton is working with the McFee gang. He sent me over to talk with you. The cattlemen up here had better organize, or they will be destroyed one by one!"

MORMON BLAINE shook his big head stubbornly. "We Mormons fight only in defense of our homes and our women," he answered with simple dignity. "We follow the teachings of the Prince of Peace!"

Wayne Morgan wrinkled his brow and reached deep into his memory. Perhaps he could appeal to the big man's reason, and then he smiled and quoted a long-forgotten passage.

"Yes, the Prince of Peace," he repeated. "Who was it that said: 'I come not to bring you peace, but a sword'? Seems to me I read that verse somewhere when I was a little button!"

Mormon Blaine was staring at Morgan with his mouth open. Brad Blaine stroked the rope-burn on his throat, and then the elder Blaine trapped his lips together.

"Out of the mouths of babes and fools come wisdom," he recited just above a whisper. "I will reconsider my decision, Morgan. Tell Rob Ranson I will ride over to the Triangle C tonight for that meeting, but I won't promise anything. How's your

neck feel, son?"

Morgan smiled and took a deep breath as Brad replied that his throat was a little sore. Every animal will fight when its young is attacked, and Morgan knew that a grave question had been raised in Mormon Blaine's mind about the honesty of Sam Clanton.

"Thanks kindly, Mormon, and I'll be riding along," Morgan said, and Blaine smiled at the friendly way Morgan had used his name.

"I'm thanking you for what you did for me and mine this day," Blaine answered gratefully. "And Morgan?"

"Yeah?"

"Be very careful if you meet Solo Frayne. He's fast, and deadly!"

"I'll take care of myself," Morgan promised, and rode out of the big yard with a feeling that he had accomplished something.

Not that he expected the Mormons to be active allies; he knew better. But the trend of events had definitely set a pattern, and Blaine would be openly suspicious of Sam Clanton as well as the McFee gang.

Morgan was riding through a lava bed when he heard the soft cry of a hunting lion. He raised his head, placed the sound, and continued toward a nest of rocks which spiraled up above the brush. He sat his Rafter R horse with his back to the brush, and a low voice spoke softly.

"You are watched, Senor. Two men wait by the little creek where you will cross!"

"Senor" was the only name the Yaqui Indian, Blue Hawk, had ever used in addressing the Masked Rider since they had become partners of the trails. Now Morgan reined in his horse to hear more.

CHAPTER III

Gun-Fighter's Challenge

A BLUEJAY screamed noisily and flew from a patch of brush near a stream of shimmering water in the near distance. Morgan followed the flight of the bird with narrowed eyes, and he spoke softly without turning his head.

"Two men, you say, Blue Hawk?" he asked softly. "Friends or enemies?"

The answer came in the soft dialect of a man who is more accustomed to Spanish than to English.

"They ride the S Bar C horses, Senor," the Indian said. "One left the Double B not long ago. He met this tall lean hombre who has the face of the hawk. He is like the lobo, Senor!"

"You have done well, Blue Hawk," Morgan murmured in a tone of gratitude. "The one who waited will be Solo Frayne. Now listen carefully, *amigo*. There will be a secret meeting at the Triangle C tonight, and Wayne Morgan will be there."

Now the bluejay was silent, and for a long moment Wayne Morgan sat lost in thought. At last he nodded his head and told the Indian to bring up Midnight. No one except Blue Hawk knew that Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider were the same man, and Morgan slid from the Rafter R horse and took the long black cape the Indian handed to him. After adjusting a black domino mask over his eyes, and mounting the magnificent black stallion, even Morgan's voice had changed when he spoke as the Masked Rider.

"I will circle and ride down there, Blue Hawk. Perhaps I can speak to Solo Frayne. Give me five minutes, and then you ride into view, but keep well out of range.

Blue Hawk nodded and led the Rafter R horse back into the brush. He wore a crimson bandeau around his forehead to keep the long black hair from his eyes. A hickory shirt was tucked down into white drill pants, and his feet were encased in handmade moccasins. Blue Hawk was a Yaqui who had received his education in the Mission schools along the Mexican Border, and he had all of the cunning and endurance of his race.

The Masked Rider rode through the brush and circled high above the little creek where the two ambushers lay in wait. He kept to the brush and in the shadows of volcanic rocks, and he watched the sensitive ears of his horse. Midnight would warn him of hidden dangers, and when the horse pricked its ears forward, the Masked Rider reined in behind a thicket of prickly pear and dismounted.

After looping the bridle-reins around the saddle-horn, the tall masked man made his way through the desert wasteland with the stealth of a badlands lobo. Then he saw the shimmer of water up ahead where a fringe of willows lined the margin of the creek.

No Indian could have moved with more

speed and caution as the Masked Rider crouched low and made his way to the little stream. Lush grass grew between huge boulders to deaden the sound of his boots, and then a harsh voice spoke softly.

"It's a redskin, Solo. The one who travels with the Masked Rider!"

The Masked Rider smiled coldly and moved up close. Then he saw Sam Clanton crouching behind a screen of brush, staring at a distant figure. Blue Hawk was flitting in and out of the brush, but keeping well out of rifle range.

The man with Sam Clanton was tall and lean, with the predatory features of the hunting hawk. A six-shooter was belted below his right hip, with the handle tilted out for a fast draw. This was Solo Frayne; segundo to Twins McFee, and second only to the boss outlaw in six-shooter magic.

Sam Clanton raised a rifle to his shoulder and lined his sights on the distant Yaqui. The Masked Rider stepped into the clear with a six-shooter in his right hand. He spoke sharp and clear.

"Drop that rifle, Sam Clanton!"

CLANTON and Frayne whirled about, and Clanton dropped his Winchester. Solo Frayne stopped the hand that was slapping for his holstered pistol when he saw the gun in the Masked Rider's hand.

"It's that blasted outlaw!" he swore savagely. "He never takes a chance!"

"Were you taking a chance?" the Masked Rider asked bluntly. "You were waiting for some one, perhaps?"

"And I'll get the son!" Frayne snarled. "Wayne Morgan, I mean. I've noticed that cowhand is always close about whenever the Masked Rider buys chips in any game!"

The Masked Rider stiffened, and his eyes glittered behind the black mask. How much did Solo Frayne know?

"You know Morgan?" he asked quietly, but his nerves tingled as he awaited the answer.

"I've got a sneaking hunch that you and him are pards!" Solo Frayne barked, and the Masked Rider breathed more easily.

"Morgan never shot a man in the back," the Masked Rider spoke clearly. "Which is more than can be said for you and Twins McFee!"

"Yeah, Twins," Frayne said more quietly. "He'd give his stake to match guns with you. And I'd give mine to do the same with this meddling Wayne Morgan."

"I'll give McFee a chance some day," the Masked Rider answered carelessly. "Can you say as much when you meet Morgan?"

He was surprised at the change which swept over the lean outlaw. Solo Frayne's right hand jerked spasmodically, and his fingers began to twitch. His greenish eyes took on a peculiar glow as his thin lips began to curl and twist.

"I'd go walking over red-hot rocks in my bare feet to meet Morgan," Frayne almost whispered. "He thinks he's fast with his shooting-irons, but I know I've got him beat. My fingers get to aching every time I think of that hired gunman. They get to hurting with an ache that nothing but the buck of a kicking gun can cure!"

"Yeah, I know," the Masked Rider answered gently. "That feeling comes only to those who have killed at the risk of their own lives. It's a gun-powder disease, and you've got it bad!"

"I don't want to be cured!" Frayne snarled viciously. "Next to Twins McFee, I'm the fastest man with a Colt in the Strip!"

"You're not!" the Masked Rider corrected. "Ask Sam Clanton!"

"You've seen Morgan recent," Clanton said positively. "You talked to him!"

"I saw him fade your pass on the Double B," the Masked Rider answered without hesitation. "For an honest cattleman, you keep bad company, Clanton!"

The S Bar C owner shifted nervously and refused to meet the eyes of Solo Frayne. The outlaw was staring at the Masked Rider, and he spoke just above his breath.

"He can't get us both, Clanton. Who wants to live forever?"

The Masked Rider tightened the grip on his gun. Then his lips smiled, and he spoke quietly.

"Don't do what you were thinking, Frayne," he warned. "Blue Hawk would get Clanton!"

"Try again!" Frayne sneered, and his hand shadowed the grips of his holstered gun. "That's an old one!"

"Do not move, Senor!" a steady voice warned behind the two men.

Solo Frayne sighed and relaxed. Sam Clanton turned slowly and stared at Blue Hawk who was covering him with the rifle Clanton had dropped. A little shudder twitched Clanton's spine, and he raised both hands quickly. Solo Frayne spoke harshly:

"Get it said and tell it scarey, Masked

Rider. You don't aim to shoot me and Sam, and you're no part of the law!"

"That's right," the Masked Rider agreed. "Just tell your boss, Frayne. Tell him he better quit the Strip while he can. Every man in his gang has a price on his head, and the cattlemen will fight him until every man is either killed or driven out of the badlands!"

"I'll tell him," Frayne sneered. "And if you see Morgan soon, tell him I'll give him a fair chance for his taw. I've got that cowhand beat to the gun, and we both know it!"

"If I see Morgan, I'll tell him what you said," the Masked Rider agreed quietly. "That's all. Mount up and ride!"

THE Masked Rider made a slight movement with his head as he locked glances with Blue Hawk. The Indian faded back into the brush, and Clanton and Frayne walked behind a nest of rocks and mounted their horses. They rode south without glancing back, and they did not see the Indian flitting from rock to rock like a shadow.

The Masked Rider turned and retraced his steps to the place where he had left Midnight. The black stallion whickered softly, and the Masked Rider vaulted to the saddle. Then they were racing in a swift lope to the hiding place where Blue Hawk had waited.

The Masked Rider parted the brush and led the stallion into a roomy dry cave. He stripped his saddle-gear, took off the black cape and mask, and left the cave. A moment later he snugged his old gray Stetson tight over his eyes, mounted the Rafter R horse, and headed for the Rafter R.

The shadows of twilight were lengthening when Morgan rode into the Rafter R yard and reported to Rob Ranson. He told of his meeting with Clanton, the promise of Mormon Blaine to attend the meeting that night at the Triangle C, and Ranson expressed his satisfaction.

"What do you think about Sam Clanton?" Ranson asked Morgan. "His spread runs right into the badlands, and he claims he would be wiped out if he got to fighting the McFee gang."

"Off-hand, I'd say you can't play with skunks without getting some of the scent on you," Morgan answered honestly. "Then again, he just might be loyal to the

Wayne Morgan's six-shooter was out and covering Clanton before the rancher's gun could clear leather (CHAP. II)

men who draw his pay. Bowdie was on the S Bar C payroll, and Clanton rode into the Double B to take up for Bowdie."

"He's a rustler the same as that gang!" Ranson declared positively. "I want you to ride over thataway tomorrow and see what you can find out. You will ride with me to the Triangle C tonight, and you can tell the other men about Sam Clanton. Now you better wash up for supper, and rope out a fresh horse."

"Like you said, boss," Morgan agreed, and he led his horse to the holding corral and tied up at a rail.

Morgan could see Tad Fowler and Tom Tucker watching from the barn as he took down his catch rope. The two Rafter R hands were forking hay to the stock, but watching the new man's every movement. Morgan entered the corral, picked out a tall roan gelding, and made a hoolly-Ann cast to snare the roan. He didn't spook the other horses, and leading the roan from the corral, he changed his gear and turned the tired horse in with the cavvy.

He knew the Rafter R hands had accepted him when Fowler walked over and warned him that the roan was high-headed.

"Ain't worth a cuss for roping, but he can shore burn the breeze on riding circle," Fowler added.

Morgan thanked Fowler, and the two walked to the bunkhouse and filled basins from the pump with cold water. They chatted as they washed for supper, and Fowler talked with his head turned away.

"The boss is shore sweet on the Caldwell filly," Fowler said carelessly. "For that matter, so is young Brad Blaine."

Morgan listened and wondered why the cowboy was giving him the range gossip. Fowler dried his face on a huck towel, and explained.

"Brad Blaine ain't a man of peace like those other Mormons," Fowler said thoughtfully. "He goes to the dances, and Rob Ranson most always takes Marian. Those two are sort of edging at each other, but the boss has the inside track."

"I don't get it," Morgan admitted frankly.

"Well, Rob he tells Marian not to go riding alone, and she's a high-headed young filly," Fowler continued. "Then Brad Blaine tells Marian it's a free country, and takes her for long rides. Rob don't like it none, not with this outlaw gang so close. She rode past here this afternoon, and she and Rob had a row when she refused to ride on back to the Triangle C. She hasn't come back yet, and the boss is worried."

Morgan dried his hands and face and shrugged to set his wool shirt. "She might have rode around the Rafter R," he commented, but Fowler shook his head stubbornly.

"She'd have to ride past here," he persisted. "And it's almost dark now."

Morgan shrugged and sat down on a bench outside the bunkhouse. The old cooky beat on a pie-pan and gave the familiar call to: "Come and get it!" Morgan waited until the other men were seated, and then he took a chair at the long table.

The Rafter R crew ate silently, with the hearty appetites of the outdoor man. They were leaving the kitchen when a Triangle C cowboy galloped into the big yard, reined in his frothing chestnut and called to Rob Ranson.

"You seen Marian, Rob?"

"You mean she hasn't gotten home yet?" Ranson almost shouted.

"Old Curt thought mebbe she stopped here and would ride over with you tonight," the cowboy answered, but his tone told of his worry. "Mebbe we'd better have a look before you start for the meeting tonight!"

CHAPTER IV

Badlands Lobo

TURNING TO WAYNE MORGAN, Rob Ranson gave him a searching glance. There was a stricken expression on his handsome bronzed face. For a moment he just stared at Morgan; then he moved closer and spoke softly.

"You've got it to do, Morgan! This might be a plant, but I've got to organize the cattlemen tonight. Tell the cooky to put you up a bait of grub, and then you line out toward the Double B and see if Marian waited up there to ride back with the Blaines!"

Now Morgan realized why Fowler had told him about the quarrel between Ranson and Marian Caldwell. He had heard Rob Ranson give orders to his crew to guard the haystacks and barns against attack, and Morgan's eyes brightened as he thought of Blue Hawk out there, somewhere in the darkness. He also knew that Ranson expected him to stay out until he found the girl or some trace of her, or Ran-

son would not have told him to take some food with him.

Morgan watched the young Rafter R owner as he tightened his latigo while the cooky was getting him the food he would pack in his saddle-bags. Ranson was quick in all his movements, and now he paced like a caged tiger. Morgan knew that Ranson wanted to be in two places at the same time.

"Bring Marian home if you find her, Morgan," Ranson said curtly. "And don't depend on any help from Brad Blaine; he's just a yearling!"

Morgan nodded, took the package of food from the old cook, and mounted the tall roan. "Like you said, boss," he answered Ranson, and rode into the darkness.

Rob Ranson didn't know it, Morgan thought, but it was practical at times to have a dual personality. While a man could not be in two places at the same time, he could certainly give that impression to foes and friends alike. Circumstances usually decided whether Morgan would be the Masked Rider or himself, and the same steady nerves and fearless courage would be behind the heavy six-shooters tied low on Wayne Morgan's powerful legs.

He rode for a half hour through the young night, bearing northwest toward the Utah line, and the lava badlands. The quavering call of a hunting lion keened down the wind from a little mesa surrounded by impenetrable brush, and Morgan reined his horse to the left and rode at a walk.

Only the starglow provided light, but Morgan had keen vision, and very sensitive hearing.

"I am here, Senor," a soft voice broke the stillness. "You look for the young senorita, Senor?"

Wayne Morgan hummed softly to express his satisfaction. Blue Hawk would have seen anything unusual even in the wild badlands, and Morgan answered in a hushed whisper.

"Yes, Blue Hawk. Come closer, and tell me what you know of the Senorita Caldwell!"

A hand touched him on the shoulder. The faint odor of wood smoke came to Morgan's nostrils. He reached up and took the Indian's hand, pressed it firmly to show his gratitude, and thus further cemented the bond between himself and his Yaqui ally.

"I listen, amigo," Morgan suggested in a whisper.

"That one from the S Bar C," Blue Hawk spoke sibilantly. "He ride south to the meeting of the cattleman. The one you call Solo Frayne he ride back and hide in the brush. When the senorita come along just before twilight, Frayne roped her from the saddle!"

Wayne Morgan felt his muscles tighten. Here were two complications that also required a man to be in two places at the same time. Then he relaxed as he remembered Rob Ranson's openly expressed suspicion of Sam Clanton. Clanton would hardly be allowed to sit in the councils of the cattlemen.

An angry hum escaped from Morgan's tight lips as he thought of Solo Frayne, and Marian Caldwell. Would Frayne take her to the hideout of the McFee gang? Morgan solwly shook his head, and then Blue Hawk spoke softly.

"He take her to the S Bar C, Senor. There is a line-shack not more than two miles from here. You will ride Midnight?"

MORGAN thought for a moment and shook his head. His thoughts were racing as he covered every detail of the situation in his mind. This was between Solo Frayne and Wayne Morgan, and no concern of the Masked Rider.

Blue Hawk made no comment. He had traveled the long trails with Morgan from Canada to below the Mexican Border. Wayne Morgan was alive because of his uncanny speed and skill with a six-shooter, but the Yaqui also knew of gunpowder custom. A challenge had been issued and accepted. The Masked Rider and Wayne Morgan always helped the forces of decency against those of lawlessness.

Morgan wrestled with his problem. He wanted to prove that Solo Frayne was wrong in his boasting that he was the fastest man in the Strip with his weapons of death. He never looked for gun trouble, and many times he had ridden away to avoid taking the life of some braggart.

Solo Frayne was different, Morgan told himself. Frayne would never rest until he had faced him for a showdown. Morgan shook his head, and then he sighed. This was different too. Frayne was holding Marian Caldwell a prisoner, and Marian was a beautiful girl. Morgan had reached a decision.

"You will ride with Wayne Morgan, amigo," he told Blue Hawk. "In some way,

we must get Frayne out of that cabin!"

He reined his horse abruptly and urged his horse through the twisting mazes of the badlands tangles. Now Morgan's eyes were accustomed to the murky light, and Blue Hawk had the eyes of a cat. The Indian took the lead and he did not speak until the brush thinned some, giving way to the rubble of the desert wasteland.

"We leave the horses here, Senor," the Yaqui said softly. "You can see the line-shack outlined against the sky. You have the plan, Senor?"

Wayne Morgan had been thinking hard. He nodded and swung down from the saddle. After tying the horses to mesquite clumps, Morgan spoke with his lips close to Blue Hawk's right ear.

"This man Clanton," Morgan reminded Blue Hawk. "You remember his voice?"

"*Si*, senor," the Indian answered promptly, and then his voice changed. "Solo Frayne, I'm hurt bad!" he said in a harsh voice, and it sounded like Sam Clanton.

Morgan smiled and slapped Blue Hawk affectionately on the shoulder. "That's it, Blue Hawk!" he praised. "You keep your distance, but when I get closer to the cabin, you call out. Then groan some, and call Solo Frayne by name!"

The Indian nodded soberly. His were not the ways of the white man, but Wayne Morgan was his friend. He also knew that he would have to remain out of sight to protect the identity of Morgan.

Blue Hawk watched while Morgan merged with the shadows and began his slow approach to the line shack. Cracks of light were visible from a front and side window, and off in the distance a coyote howled. Then came the soft muted call of a burrow owl, and Blue Hawk began his part in the little badlands drama.

"Frayne!" he called in a wavering voice. "Give me a hand, Solo Frayne!"

Wayne Morgan hugged the side of the little cabin in the darkness. He heard a boot scrape inside, and then Blue Hawk began to groan. A moment of silence, after which the wavering call came again. Morgan raised his head suddenly and listened. He would have sworn that the voice he heard was that of Sam Clanton. Solo Frayne must have thought so too, because the door was thrown back and Frayne ran from the cabin, gun in hand.

"Where are you, Clanton?" he shouted cautiously, as he stopped in the path of light from the open door.

"Don't move, Frayne!" a voice warned sternly. "Wayne Morgan speaking!"

Solo Frayne snarled and stood transfixed in the yellow light from the coal oil lamp. Then he holstered his six-shooter and straightened his shoulders. A muffled cry came from inside the cabin.

"Shoot now or draw me evens!" Frayne spoke harshly. "I knew you wouldn't take a chance!"

UPON HEARING this, Morgan stiffened and lowered his gun. He started to holster the weapon, and then he heard that muffled moan again from the cabin.

"The girl," Morgan said harshly. "You've hurt her?"

"She ain't hurt," Frayne answered quickly. "Leave her out of it. You killed Bowdie, and he was a pard of mine!"

Wayne Morgan's lips tightened. He holstered his six-shooter and flexed his fingers to limber them for quick action. He knew that Solo Frayne would follow him until the final showdown.

"The girl will smother in just a little," Frayne taunted in a harsh whisper. "And you can't get inside to help her!"

Wayne Morgan felt a surge of anger which almost robbed him of reason. Time was as precious as the life-giving air which was being denied to Marian Caldwell's starving lungs. Morgan stepped into the shaft of light facing the crouching outlaw, and Solo Frayne gave the go-ahead without fear, and without hesitation.

"Draw!" he shouted. "I'm plugging yuh —now!"

Wayne Morgan slapped down with his right hand. His thumb caught the hammer as his hand was whipping up, and a tongue of flame belched from the muzzle of his leaping gun. A second stuttering explosion echoed as a fire-fly winked in the shaft of light ten paces away.

Wayne Morgan leaped backward through the open door and ran to a bunk against the west wall. Marian Caldwell was bound hand and foot, and a pillow covered her face, wrapped with a piggin' string.

Morgan jerked the knot loose and threw the pillow on the filthy floor. He jerked off his battered gray Stetson and fanned the unconscious girl. Then he rubbed her wrists after cutting the rawhide thongs with his stock knife.

Marian Caldwell did not stir for a long moment. Then her long lashes fluttered,

and Morgan kept fanning her with his hat. She jerked up suddenly to a sitting position, and a scream burst from her tight throat.

"Easy, Miss Marian," Morgan spoke gently. "You are with a friend now, and everything is all right!"

The girl shuddered and leaned back to stare at him. Then her arms went around him as she began to sob with reaction. Morgan waited until her sobs had subsided before he spoke again.

"Yore father is worried, Miss Marian, and so is Rob Ranson. He sent me to find you."

Marian Caldwell raised her head and drew away. She smoothed her blond hair and answered angrily:

"Rob was so busy that he could not come himself, so he sent his hired gun-fighter!"

"That's right," Morgan answered coldly. "You were almost smothered when I got here, but Solo Frayne won't bother you again!"

The girl shuddered violently. "You mean—he is dead?"

"Being a hired gunfighter, I never throw off my shots in a powdersmoke showdown, espeically when the life of a pretty girl is at stake," Morgan answered quietly.

He reached down and severed the thongs which bound her ankles, and Marian Caldwell came close to him when he straightened up.

"I'm sorry," she said contritely, but Morgan straightened up and shrugged her away.

"If you are sorry, tell Rob Ranson, and don't go riding alone any more," he answered gruffly.

"Take me home!" the girl demanded. "My horse is out in the corral behind the shack!"

"I'll go with you while you get it," Morgan answered stiffly. "Can you walk?"

"Thank you, yes," and Marian Caldwell took a quick step.

She would have fallen if Morgan had not caught her, and he pulled the single chair to her and told her to rest awhile. The circulation had left her ankles, and the girl rubbed them vigorously. Her face was turned away.

Morgan watched with a little smile tugging at his lips. Marian Caldwell was just nineteen, and badly spoiled. Her father was a wealthy man, and it was a new experience to her to be treated with indifference.

"You saved my life," she whispered. "I won't ever forget. Solo Frayne said he knew you would come, but he didn't expect you until daylight. He said that one of you would die!"

"Frayne died, and you and I are alive," Morgan said coldly. "I had no other choice!"

"You won't be alive for long!" a deep voice warned quietly.

CHAPTER V

Stalemate

MARIAN CALDWELL stifled a scream as she stared at the open door. Wayne Morgan watched the girl's face, trying to read what it was that had terrified her. Then he turned slowly to face a big man with wide shoulders, very small hips, and two matched six-shooters in his strong brown hands. The face above those wide shoulders was undeniably handsome, and the gray eyes were fearless and arrogant.

[*Turn page*]

HEADACHE
UPSET STOMACH
JUMPY NERVES
RELIEF!
THANKS TO FAMOUS
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Here was a man who was a leader of men, and Morgan knew the answer instantly. He nodded and spoke quietly.

"Howdy, McFee. The name is Wayne Morgan!"

"I know yore handle, and now you know mine," the outlaw leader said in his deep clear voice. "So you killed Solo Frayne!"

"That's right," Morgan agreed with a nod.

"I'd like to know," McFee said musingly. "I'll even take your word for it. Was it a fair shake?"

"It was a fair shake," Morgan answered honestly. "I had him under my gun, but the girl was smothering under a pillow. I holstered up and Frayne gave the go-ahead. It was mighty close!"

"It was," McFee agreed. "I heard the shots; one sounded like the echo of the first one. So Frayne is dead, and you've lived long enough!"

Wayne Morgan stared at the bold handsome face for a long time. His lips parted, but there was nothing to say. Then Marian Caldwell started up from the chair, but the outlaw waved her down and spoke sharply.

"Stay where you are, gal. I've little time for sentiment of any kind in my business. This buscadero sold his guns, and it's his time to die!"

"Give me the chance I gave Frayne!" Morgan pleaded in a husky whisper. "He said you were the fastest in the Strip!"

"I am the fastest," McFee answered coldly. "There's only one man I'd give an even break, and I don't mean to take any chance!"

"This one man," Morgan said. "He's fast with his guns?"

"So fast his victims never even see his hand move," McFee murmured. "I'll meet him some day for a draw-and-shoot, and there will be one less outlaw in the bloody Strip!"

"You said outlaw!"

"I said the Masked Rider!" McFee answered viciously. "Every time I hear his name my hand—"

"I know," Morgan interrupted. "You get a pain in your hand that nothing except a bucking gun can cure."

"Hands," McFee corrected. "I can roll 'em with either hand, but you got the rest of it right. And you ought to know," he added. "You killed Solo Frayne!"

Wayne Morgan studied the cold handsome face of his captor. Then he began to smile, and Twins McFee jerked up his head with a frown.

"You think it is funny to die?" he asked.

Morgan shrugged. "No one lives forever," he said carelessly. "If you killed me, you would not live to face the Masked Rider for a showdown, and then you'd never know who was the fastest!"

"I've heard about you, Morgan," the outlaw said, and it was evident that he was puzzled. "You've got some good reason for saying what you did?"

"I have," Morgan answered without excitement. "I have help you cannot see, McFee. If you kill me now, you will lose the chance to test your speed and skill against the Masked Rider!"

"That one had whiskers when I was a button," McFee sneered contemptuously. "You'll have to think up a better one!"

"Are you all right, Morgan?" a voice called from a distance. "I saw McFee go into the cabin!"

"So you didn't come alone," McFee said coldly. "I reckon Solo Frayne was right about some things. Are you and this Masked Rider in cahoots?"

MORGAN shook his head slowly. "No," he answered. "But I've heard of him a time or two. I never heard of the Masked Rider killing a man without giving him a chance. Now it's your play."

"It might be him, or a hand from the Rafter R," McFee said thoughtfully. "He might get me from the dark when I came out."

"He might," Morgan agreed. "So?"

"I'll make a deal," McFee offered. "It's a draw now the way I see it, and I mean to keep it that way. I've got you under my shooting iron, but you've got a pard out there in the brush. Tell him to ride off, and I'll do the same!"

"Suggest a better one," Morgan said slowly. "I don't make that kind of a deal with a feller I can't trust!"

Swift anger changed the satisfied expression on the outlaw's face. His lips snarled back to show even white teeth that were almost perfect.

"Unsay those words before I blast you to Kingdom Come!" he whispered hoarsely.

Wayne Morgan shook his head. "No," he refused. "You don't allow sentiment to interfere with business. Well?"

"I admire yore courage," McFee conceded. "You have a plan?"

"I have," Morgan answered promptly. "Miss Caldwell leaves us, gets on her

horse, and rides away with my pard. You holster yore gun now, and you can make up yore mind when we are alone!"

Twins McFee leaned forward and stared deep into Morgan's steady eyes. Satisfied finally, he nodded his head.

"Get out of here, gal!" he snapped at Marian Caldwell. "And if you see yore sweetheart, tell him he had better leave the Strip while he can!"

"Rob isn't afraid of you," Marion answered angrily, and then she bit her lip.

"So it is Rob Ranson," McFee said with a chuckle. "Hit yore saddle, and always remember that the blood of one man was spilled because of you. It might be good for yore vanity. Now scoot before I change my mind!"

Out in the darkness, Blue Hawk remained silent. The girl ran from the cabin, circled to the corral, and a moment later rode out on her Triangle C horse.

"Please be careful, Wayne," she called anxiously.

Twins McFee smiled and holstered his right-hand gun. He stood away from the door, and there was no sign of fear in his wide gray eyes. The horse walked away, and when it could no longer be heard, McFee spoke quietly.

"It's still a stalemate, Morgan. You can wait until I settle with this Masked Rider."

"I can wait," Morgan agreed. "I haven't much choice."

"You have a better plan?" McFee asked curiously.

"You're still dealing," Morgan answered, resisting an urge to settle with this outlaw now. "I'll play what I catch on the draw!"

"I believe you would," McFee answered soberly. "So I'll call it a stalemate for now. I know you won't shoot me in the back, and you know I won't shoot you. Well?"

"Keno," Morgan answered without hesitation. "Perhaps we shall meet another time."

"If we do, I'll shoot on sight!" McFee warned sternly. "I don't often give an enemy a chance, and I won't give you another one. Now you better ride on out and quit the country."

He turned his back abruptly and stepped outside the cabin. Wayne Morgan followed without hesitation, and he saw the tall outlaw mount a big gray stallion and hit the horse with the hooks. Morgan watched him gallop away with a smile of admiration curving his lips, and then he returned to the shack, blew down the lamp chimney to extinguish the flame, and closed the door after him.

AS HE approached the thicket where he had left his horse, Marian Caldwell called softly and rode out to meet him.

"I'm so glad you didn't anger Twins McFee," she said shakily. "He would have killed you."

"Perhaps not," Morgan answered shortly, and kept on walking to his horse. He pulled the slip-knot, mounted up, and shook out his bridle-reins. "We both owe that Indian a debt," he added more quietly.

"Blue Hawk rode away like the wind," the girl explained. "He said he had a message for the Masked Rider," and Marian shuddered, "I heard the message," she whispered.

"So did I, so let's get back to the Triangle C," Morgan suggested. "Rob Ranson will be worried about you!"

"I was tricked into saying what I did," the girl answered tartly. "Please say nothing to Rob about it. Will you promise?"

"No'm!"

"You won't?"

"Your pride bruises easy, but it heals quick," Morgan answered stiffly. "Just remember what that boss owlhooter told you about vanity!"

Marian Caldwell nodded and made no reply. She seemed suddenly very humble, and Morgan shrugged and suggested they mend the pace. It still rankled because the girl had called him a hired gunfighter. A man was lying dead back in the badlands because of a willful girl, and Wayne Morgan made no attempt to lessen her responsibility.

"I won't ever go riding alone until this terrible business is settled, Mr. Morgan," she said after a long silence.

"It would be better that way," Morgan agreed.

"And you will promise to say nothing to Rob Ranson?"

"I'm working for Ranson, and I'll tell him what I think he should know," Morgan answered irritably, and he urged his horse to a swift gallop to stop the conversation.

Marian Caldwell had learned her lesson well, and she gigged with both spurs to keep up with Morgan. But even above the

rush of the wind, he heard her speak tensely.

"I hate you, Wayne Morgan!"

That was the way he wanted it, Morgan told himself. Marian Caldwell didn't have enough competition in the wild Strip country, and there would be trouble between Brad Blaine and Rob Ranson. That trouble was brewing, Morgan knew definitely.

They raced past the Rafter R where Morgan called to Tad Fowler that Marian was safe. He did not stop to talk, but headed south for the Triangle C where the cattlemen were holding their meeting. He slowed the pace when they came within sight of the lights in the big house, and the girl rode up close and held out her hand.

"I'm thanking you for what you did for me tonight, Wayne," she said humbly.

"I was only doing the work I get paid to do," Morgan answered a trifle bitterly. "Yonder comes Rob and yore father out of the house, so you ride on ahead and relieve their fears!"

Marian Caldwell nodded and spurred her horse. She raced up to the tie-rail, dismounted quickly, and ran to her father. Old Curt Caldwell caught her in his arms, while Rob Ranson watched with hunger in his eyes.

"It was terrible, Dad," the girl sobbed. "Solo Frayne caught me, and took me to a line-shack on the S Bar C. He said he knew Wayne Morgan would follow him!"

"Which he did," Caldwell said soothingly. "And a mighty good thing for you that he did!"

Brad Blaine came into the yard just as Morgan rode up to the tie-rail. The young Mormon stared at Marian, and then reached out and touched her shoulder with his hand. Rob Ranson slapped the hand away, and Blaine snarled and fell into a crouch.

ROB RANSON stiffened and shadowed the gun on his right leg. Mormon Blaine came forward quickly, but Wayne Morgan dropped from the saddle between the two angry men. Then he grunted and excused himself, but he faced Ranson and jerked his head toward the barn.

"Could I speak to you for a minute, boss?" he asked grimly.

Rob Ranson glared and then nodded. He walked to the barn with Morgan; waited for the report.

"Solo Frayne is dead, Ranson," Morgan said without emotion. "Twins McFee got me under his gun. He'd have killed me if that Indian hadn't slipped up in the dark to make it a draw!"

"Indian? You mean Blue Hawk?"

Morgan nodded. "He was gone when I came out of the cabin; taking a message Twins McFee sent to the Masked Rider. And, Ranson?"

"Yeah, Morgan!"

"Don't get gun-proud with young Brad Blaine. I won't tell you who Miss Marian really loves, but it isn't young Brad!"

"Just a minute, cowboy!" Ranson said jerkily. "Ain't you just a little bit over yore head?"

"If I am, I'll swim out," Morgan answered in the same tone, and then his manner changed. "Did you organize the cattlemen?" he asked quietly.

CHAPTER VI

The Outlaws' Lair

UPON hearing the question Mormon Blaine answered before Rob Ranson could speak.

"We're organized now, Morgan," he said soberly. "I'm thanking you for being a man of peace just now!"

Morgan nodded. He knew Blaine was referring to the sudden flare of tempers between Rod Ranson and young Brad. He glanced at the faces of several other cattlemen gathered in the big yard, then turned to Ranson.

"Did Sam Clanton ride down here?"

"He was here," Ranson answered, and his face was hard. "Clanton might be in with the McFee gang, or he might be paying tribute because of his location. Either way, we didn't want him telling that outlaw about our plans!"

"You have plans?" Morgan asked expectantly.

Mormon Blaine frowned, but Ranson smiled without mirth. A frosty smile which meant fight. Brad Blaine was staring at Ranson with a scowl on his bearded young face, and Marian Caldwell had gone into the big house.

"We have plans," Ranson answered with a nod. "Twins McFee knows all about every ranch in this part of the Strip. He also gets news out of Purgatory, the County seat. We know very little about him or his way of living, except that there is a hideout back in the badlands.

We want to know more about that hide-out!"

His voice hummed the last words as he leaned toward Morgan. The new Rafter R man knew what was coming, but he showed no surprise. He merely nodded and said he'd saddle a fresh horse when they got back to the Rafter R.

"We want you to learn something about McFee's hideout," Ranson said slowly. "If they catch you, it would be mighty serious. But you don't have to go," he added, as he watch Morgan's rugged face closely.

"I'll go under one condition," Morgan parried slowly. "I ride alone. If not, you can send some one else!"

"Then it's settled," Ranson spoke with finality. "Before you ride out, I want you to meet Crail Towers here. Crail is the cattle buyer we deal with, and we'll be selling our beef steers soon!"

Morgan had been watching the stranger who seemed well known to the ranchers. Towers was a tall spare man in his early forties, and he was dressed like a prosperous cattleman. His hand-made boots and expensive Stetson were the tip-off, and an unlighted cigar was clenched between his stained teeth.

"Glad to know you, Morgan," Towers said and held out his hand as he acknowledged the introduction. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Howdy," Morgan answered, and he was surprised at the strength in the buyer's fingers when Towers gripped his hand. "Let me get this straight," Morgan said slowly. "You buy from all the stock raisers?"

"That's right," Towers agreed. "I pay top prices, and I ship from Purgatory or Saint George, which ever happens to be closest to the holding point.

"Do you buy from Clanton?" Morgan persisted.

"I buy from anyone who has clean cattle to sell," Towers answered with a wide smile. "If the bills of sale are in order, and the beef is prime, that's all I want to know!"

Morgan nodded carelessly. That was all he wanted to know, also, and he mounted his Rafter R horse after saying he was glad to have met all the cattlemen. Rob Ranson said he'd be getting back to the Rafter R with Morgan, and the two rode out of the big yard.

Ranson scowled thoughtfully as they loped along in the starlight. When they were well away from the Triangle C, he spoke carelessly, but with evident curiosity.

"Why did you question Crail Towers?"

"Sleepers," Morgan answered without hesitation. "That's what started all this trouble here in the Strip. You know that the McFee gang is stealing yore calves before branding time. There's plenty of grass back there deep in the lavas, and calves grow up into shipping steers."

"Every cattleman in the Strip has been complaining about the calf-crop," Ranson said slowly. "We thought perhaps Sam Clanton had a deal with McFee, but we can't prove anything. Clanton's calf-tally is bigger than ours, but not big enough to account for all our losses."

MORGAN said thoughtfully. "Solo Frayne. He took up for Bowdie, and Bowdie was working for Clanton. Looks to me like several fellers up here ain't letting their right hands know what their left hands do."

Ranson changed the subject and he rode closer to stare into Morgan's face. "About

[*Turn page*]

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Marian. You saved her life, but you've only been here a day or two." He shook his head. "Naw, it couldn't be you!"

"It could be, but it isn't," Morgan answered coldly. "You figger that one yourself, Ranson. I'm drawing fighting pay from you, and that let's me out!"

"Don't get your hackles up," Ranson growled resentfully. "Sorry I mentioned the matter. I'll keep my eyes open."

"Shore," Morgan answered with a smile. "And don't forget that none are so blind as those who will not see!"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning just keep yore eyes open like you said," Morgan answered, and now he changed the subject. "I'll grab a few hours of sleep and get gone before sun-up, boss. I might be out there for a day or two, but don't worry about me. Don't send any of the boys out there where the owls hoot until I get back and make my report."

"Sorry I got to fighting my head that away," Ranson muttered, and then they rode into the Rafter R yard.

Wayne Morgan stripped his riding gear, and Ranson went to the house. Tad Fowler came out of the bunkhouse and told Morgan he had put a horse in the barn, had fed it grain, and asked about Marian Caldwell.

Morgan recited briefly the happenings of the night, and a warped-legged oldster in high-heeled boots wandered into the barn. He came to Morgan, stuck out a gnarled hand, and gripped hard.

"I'm Coosa Evans, the cook," he told Morgan. "Me and old Rawhide was saddle-pards thirty years ago, and we still are. You want a bait of hot grub before you hit out for the lavas?"

"Coosa, you're a mind-reader," Morgan answered with a chuckle. "I could do with a double order of ham and eggs, a stack of flannel cakes drippin' with blackstrap, and a gallon of cowboy coffee. Can do, old-timer?"

"Times change, but cowboys never do," Coosa answered with an understanding smile. "You ain't no different than me and Rawhide was when we were yore age. I've got the fixings all ready, and then you aim to ride on out. It won't take you long to spend the night on the Rafter R, but you know what you're doing!"

Tad Fowler said he had the graveyard watch and would eat a bite of hot grub before standing his trick at guard. He told Morgan of the various ranches, the names of the help, and old "Coosa" Evans added from his store of knowledge while he cooked up the hot meal. Morgan listened, and then ate hungrily, and after the meal, Fowler shoved a box of cleaning tools at him without speaking.

Morgan broke down his smoke-grimed gun and cleaned it thoroughly. Coosa Evans handed him an extra box of .45 cartridges, and Morgan nodded and left the cook-shack. When he had saddled the fresh Rafter R horse and stowed the cartridges away, he mounted up and waved a hand as he walked the horse from the yard.

"Take care of yoreself, cowboy," Coosa Evans called softly. "No matter what time you get back, line out for the shack and I'll throw a mess of hot vittles together for you!"

Morgan thanked the old cook and settled his old Stetson down over his eyes. He held the horse to a walk until his eyes had shed the light from the kitchen, and then he rode a narrow circle to make sure that he was not followed. Satisfied at last, he headed for the little mesa and the hidden cave in the tangles, and he smiled when he heard the distant wavering cry of a hunting lion.

Blue Hawk was nowhere in sight, but his voice spoke softly when Morgan rode into the brush screen.

"Midnight is ready, Senor. We ride now?"

"I will sleep a few hours," Morgan answered the Indian. "You followed that one called Twins McFee?"

"I followed him, Senor," Blue Hawk replied. "About eight miles from here near the border under the great red cliffs. I counted eight men, Senor. All heavily armed, and they have many fast horses."

AS MORGAN listened, he could almost see the camp of the outlaws as Blue Hawk spoke graphically. Then Morgan pulled off his boots and rolled up in a heavy blanket on a pile of pine needles. He was asleep almost at once, and he had the faculty of complete relaxation, like most outdoor men who sleep much on the ground.

Morgan awakened just before daylight, but Blue Hawk was already a-stir. A faint glow came from deep back in the cave around a bend, and after going outside and sniffing the air for the smell of smoke, Morgan nodded and went to join his faithful Indian ally.

Blue Hawk had killed a young deer

with a hunting arrow, and he had broiled steaks over a bed of deep coals. A blackened pot of hot coffee stood on a triangle of rocks, and the two men ate their breakfast and spoke sparingly.

"Is dangerous, Senor," Blue Hawk warned, but his eyes glowed when Morgan shrugged carelessly. Danger was the spice of life to both of them, and gray light was just showing against the serrated rim-rock above the Vermilion cliffs when they rode from the hidden cave.

Under the long black cape of the Masked Rider, a pair of black-butted six-shooters snugged the thighs of the Robin Hood outlaw. The black domino mask covered his eyes, and a black Stetson was snugged down on his well-shaped head. A rifle rode in the saddle-boot under the Masked Rider's left knee, and Blue Hawk took the lead and rode swiftly through the tangled mazes of the lava badlands.

The Masked Rider knew that the outlaw camp was well guarded, but Twins McFee had not counted on the keen eyes and tracking cunning of the hardy Yaqui. Blue Hawk could climb peaks that were inaccessible to most white men, and he had found an old trail grown over with cactus and brush.

The two men kept to cover and rode almost to the foot of the towering Vermilion Cliffs. Blue Hawk said they would have to leave the horses in a dry cave he had found, and then he surprised the Masked Rider who was inured to sudden and unexpected changes.

Blue Hawk continued on into the winding cave, telling his companion to keep his left hand against the smooth wall. They were in total darkness for perhaps ten minutes, and then the Masked Rider saw a finger of light ahead, but high up on the wall.

"Dismount and leave your horse here, Senor," Blue Hawk whispered. "There is a steep trail which leads out on a brushy shelf. Be careful! Do not make the noise or we will be seen when we come into the light!"

The Masked Rider felt cautiously with his boots, and he was sure that someone in a forgotten past had chiseled steps into the flinty floor of the great cave. As the light grew stronger, he could see Blue Hawk walking noiselessly on his moccasined feet. The Indian was carrying a rifle, and he was breathing easily when he stopped on a little flat shelf and held up his left hand.

The Masked Rider came up close and stood beside the Yaqui. Blue Hawk pointed to a small valley entirely surrounded by lava rock which had spilled down the mountain slopes in some forgotten long ago. A cook-fire was burning under the lee of a rocky shelf, and several saddled horses were tied to a long rail made of a pine sapling, in front of a log-and-sod house built into the side of the red cliff.

A small stream of water ran along the base of the cliff, and several men were dousing their faces in the clear cold water. When the cook beat on a pie-pan with a spoon, the silent watchers could hear his every word.

"Come and git it before I throw it to the hawgs!"

THE Masked Rider counted nine men around the fire, and Twins McFee sat apart from the main group. Blue Hawk hummed low in his throat and spoke softly.

"To the left of the fire by the house, Senor. A man is tied to that jack-pine, and he looks familiar!"

The Masked Rider stared at the prisoner for a long moment, and then he sucked in a deep breath. "That's Sam Clanton!" he whispered. "I'd have sworn he was in with McFee!"

Twins McFee ate from a tin plate, and he glanced sideward when the S Bar C man spoke pleadingly.

"You've got to turn me loose, McFee. Sittin' there on my spread, I'm between hell and hot water!"

"You've changed some, Sam," Twins McFee said quietly, but his deep voice carried through the rarefied air of the high altitude. "I told you I'd take care of the Masked Rider!"

"I've seen them both work," Clanton said hoarsely. "You never know when they are around, either Morgan, or that masked outlaw!"

"You've seen me work too," McFee reminded, and he knew his men were listening intently. "We aim to take over the Strip, and you were to be the front. Later on we'd drift back here and locate as honest cattlemen. Now you show the white feather, and I don't aim to have my plans upset!"

"Buy me out!" Sam Clanton pleaded desperately. "I'll ride out between two suns, and you can put one of your own men on the S Bar C!"

"My men are on the S Bar C now!" the outlaw answered brusquely. "Even you didn't know that, but I've no time for weaklings!"

"I tried to join that new association," Clanton argued desperately. "And while I was down there at the Triangle C, Solo Frayne was having a showdown with Wayne Morgan!"

Twins McFee laid aside his plate and stood up. His handsome face was hard like the chiseled rock, but his gray eyes were burning with a savage anger. He walked over and pulled the knots of the ropes which bound Clanton, and then he pulled the S Bar C man to his feet. Then with the terrible swiftness of a mountain cat, Twins McFee lashed out and slapped Clanton in the mouth with his open left hand.

CHAPTER VII

The Executioner

SAM CLANTON jerked back and then recoiled like a steel spring. Not as tall as McFee, Clanton was nearly as heavy, and almost as fast. His left fist pistoned out and clipped the outlaw leader on the point of the jaw. Then Sam Clanton followed through with a driving right fist which landed solidly on McFee's rugged jaw.

The Masked Rider heard the crunch of bone, and he saw Twins McFee buckle at the knees. Then McFee sagged to the ground, but several men swarmed all over Sam Clanton and dragged him to earth. One bearded ruffian threw the noose of a catch-rope over Clanton's head, snugged the powerful arms tight, and made his ties.

"I'd hate to be in yore boots now, Sam," he told the prisoner. "You're tough in a skull-and-knuckle ruckus, but you don't have what it takes to match the boss with a Colt!"

Blue Hawk glanced at the Masked Rider who shook his head slowly from side to side. The Indian had his rifle ready for a shot, but he lowered the gun obediently.

"We've got to keep this trail secret," the Masked Rider whispered. "Every one of those hombres down there is a killer, and wanted by the law!"

Blue Hawk nodded and watched from behind the thick screen of brush. The Masked Rider always helped the helpless, and the underdog, but now he was watching grimly as the outlaws waited for McFee to arouse.

Twins McFee groaned and shook his head a time or two. Then his eyes snapped open, and he came to his feet clawing at his holsters with both hands. Even in his semi-conscious condition, the twin guns leaped to his long-fingered hands like things alive.

The Masked Rider watched and sucked in a deep sighing breath. A grim look hovered around his firm lips.

Twins McFee straightened suddenly and squared his wide shoulders. He holstered both guns with swift effortless ease, stepped back a pace, and looked for a long moment at the bound figure of Sam Clanton. He spoke softly to the bearded outlaw who had roped the prisoner.

"Throw off yore ties, Colt Prosper. Prop that fighting son up on his hind legs!"

Colt Prosper grinned and pulled the slip-knot. He flipped the rope loose, jerked Clanton to his feet, and stepped behind him. McFee studied the prisoner with his lips pursed, and when he spoke his deep voice was calm and steady.

"I forgot you used to be a prize-fighter, Sam. You're all-fired fast with yore hands, and I'm going to give you a chance!"

"Thanks, Twins," Clanton murmured huskily. "I'll climb my horse and ride on out!"

"You won't!" McFee contradicted. "You never have been what a man could call really cooperative. You played along with me because you couldn't do anything else. Now you get cold feet and want to quit, and I've no time for quitters!"

Sam Clanton stared at the hard, handsome face, and he shuffled his big boots. His eyes blinked a time or two, and he glanced at the faces of the men off to the side. Most of them looked away, but Colt Prosper grinned wolfishly.

"It's almost shipping time," Clanton said desperately, like a man will do when he is sparring for time. "I'll sell my own shippers to Crail Towers, and you can have the S Bar C!"

"I've got the S Bar C now," McFee corrected. "And I'll collect for yore shipping steers."

The Masked Rider listened and tried to solve the puzzle. His hands were gripping the Winchester tightly as he watched Sam Clanton and listened intently.

"You can't collect!" Clanton argued

bluntly. "Most of those steers are clean, and branded with my iron. You couldn't get away with wholesale rustling like that. Towers wouldn't pay you, and we both know it!"

"I don't know it," McFee answered quietly. "But you know too much, Sam. And you don't follow through. You figured to make a cleaning on those shippers, and then clear out for Texas. You began to get afraid the law might ride up here in the Strip, and you figured to go straight and leave us hang and rattle!"

FOR a moment Sam Clanton stared at McFee, and then he slowly nodded his sandy head. The fingers of his right hand brushed his empty holster, and then Clanton wet his lips.

"So you mean to kill me," he said quietly, but his voice was bitter. "You forced me to furnish you with saddlestock, and you hid your rustled stuff on my place until you could move it!"

"That's stating it clearly," McFee agreed. "But I promised to give you a chance. Colt, slip his six-gun back in the holster!"

Colt Prosper stepped up behind the condemned man and slogged a heavy six-shooter in the scabbard. He snugged it down and stepped back.

Sam Clanton lowered his hand slowly, twitched the gun so it would not crimp against leather, while his eyes watched Twins McFee. The tall outlaw did not move a hand. He just watched that right hand of Clanton's, and his lips smiled a trifle as Clanton hooked both thumbs in his shell-studded belt.

"Fire when ready, Sam," McFee invited slowly. "This is yore chance!"

Sam Clanton stared for a moment, and then he began to tremble. The Masked Rider watched, and he understood. As Wayne Morgan, he had matched guns with Clanton, and it had done something to the S Bar C man.

"I can't match you, McFee!" Clanton shouted hoarsely. "We both know it, but it makes you out a cold murderer just the same!"

"I've seen men break before," McFee answered coldly. "I've heard them tell it scarey, and then fall apart when it came to the Big Thing!"

"I haven't got a chance!" Clanton argued desperately. "My gun would never clear leather!"

"I'll wait until it clears leather," McFee tormented his victim. "You were fast enough with your maulies," and he rubbed the swelling on his square jaw.

"I hope the Masked Rider rubs you out!" Sam Clanton snarled.

A sudden change swept over Twins McFee. His eyes narrowed and began to glitter. The fingers of both hands began to twitch and writhe, and Blue Hawk glanced at the face of the Masked Rider. The long brown digits were knitted with anger, and Blue Hawk drew a long wavering breath.

Twins McFee took a quick step forward and slapped viciously with his right hand. His fingers left a streak of livid welts on Clanton's pale face which was now drained of all color, except for the finger marks.

Sam Clanton settled his bulk on his big boots. Some of the color came back to his cheeks, and now his eyes were pinpoints of hatred. His hands no longer trembled, and his voice was thick but steady when he spoke to his tormentor.

"A man can't die but one time, you killer! I'd get it regardless, and I might as well die like a man!"

His right hand streaked down to his holstered gun in a draw that was faster than average. Twins McFee watched like a cat watches a helpless mouse. Just as Clanton's gun started to snout across the lip of his holster, the outlaw drove his hands down for the deadly twins on his long legs.

The Masked Rider whipped the rifle to his shoulder, and squeezed the trigger. The rifle barked flatly to blend with the roar of McFee's six-shooters.

Blue Hawk saw the pistol whip from the right hand of Twins McFee, and the outlaw was slapped into a half turn. Then Sam Clanton broke at the knees and measured his length, and the uncocked pistol dropped from his nerveless right hand.

The bark of the rifle had been drowned out by the double explosion of the heavy six-shooters. The outlaws were staring at Twins McFee, who now faced around with the smoking gun in his left hand. He checked each man off with a little tipping motion of the deadly gun. Then McFee raised his head and scanned the rim of towering cliffs.

THE smoke from the rifle had already dissipated in the thin air. Twins McFee shook his powerful shoulders, walked over to the gun which had been battered from

his hand, and picked it up. He studied the weapon closely, pointed to a bright nick on the barrel near the cylinder, and drew a deep breath.

"Only one man could shoot like that," he said slowly. "Only one man would keep a promise he made when he had a faster man under his gun. *Hasta la vista,* Masked Rider, wherever you are. Until we meet again," he interpreted softly.

The Masked Rider watched and listened, and half-closed his eyes. He had tried to save Clanton, but Twins McFee was that rarity often heard about, but seldom seen—a two-gun man who could shoot as well with one hand as the other. Most men carried the extra gun for a spare.

Blue Hawk drew back and waited for the Masked Rider to answer. But the man in black shook his head and stepped back into the trail leading to the cave. He had learned much, and he could do no more for Sam Clanton, who had tried to ride both forks of the trail.

The Masked Rider was thinking deeply as he retraced his steps through the inky darkness of the deep winding cave. Twins McFee had shown no fear or nervousness as he stood exposed to the deadly rifle in the hands of a master who had shot the six-shooter from his right hand, and the deadly-accurate slug had never touched his skin.

There were other matters, too, like the admissions from Sam Clanton that he had at least played along with the outlaws, partly because there was no alternative, and partly because of the profits involved. Profits to be derived from cattle which cost McFee nothing but the time to steal them. At least Sam Clanton had died like a brave man, and he had tried to make a last deadly fight against the superior speed of a man whom he knew he could not match.

BUT who would take over the S Bar C now that Clanton was out of the way? Only time and the utmost of range-skill would solve that mystery, and when they reached the lower cave, the Masked Rider spoke in a whisper to his silent companion.

"You will watch the S Bar C, Blue Hawk. Learn what you can without being seen. I will ride back to the Rafter R if the coast is clear, and you can signal if you want me."

"It is four miles from here to the trail leading into the valley of the outlaws," Blue Hawk answered. "Ride Midnight back to our hideout, and I will wait here until dark."

The Masked Rider did not question the loyal Yaqui. They had traveled together for years, and Blue Hawk had an uncanny faculty for reading all the telltale signs of nature. He could look at the sun or the stars and set a true course, and he could live off the country when it was not practical to get provisions in some small town or village.

The Masked Rider spoke gently to the beautiful black stallion and mounted when Midnight whickered softly. Blue Hawk walked to the entrance and watched the brush-tops. Some magpies were feeding down the trail. If anything disturbed them, they should give an unmistakable alarm.

Blue Hawk raised his hand and the Masked Rider galloped from the cave. The birds took wing with loud cries, and then horse and rider disappeared in the dense brush. Blue Hawk returned to the deeper recesses of the cave, while out on the trail, the Masked Rider rode swiftly to the southwest.

It was almost noon when he neared the little mesa which sheltered the hidden cave where he had left the stout Rafter R horse. The Masked Rider sent Midnight up another trail and rode out on a hill to make sure that he had been unobserved. His right hand reached under the black cape when he saw a tall man standing behind a volcanic pillar of rock. There was something vaguely familiar about the skulker, and then the Masked Rider nodded.

The hidden man was Colt Prosper!

How had he reached the grazing grounds ahead of Midnight? Then the Masked Rider remembered. Blue Hawk had said that it was four miles from the outlaw valley, to the base of the Vermilion Cliffs which sheltered the deep winding cavern. It would be closer to Purgatory from the trail leading to the outlaw valley, and the Masked Rider knew then that Prosper had not been trailing him.

The Masked Rider sat hidden by a brush screen, and he holstered his six-shooter. His left hand drew the Winchester rifle, and then he saw why Colt Prosper was waiting. A tall man was riding from the north on the trail leading from the Utah border. A young man with a silky black beard, untouched by razor or shears.

CHAPTER VIII

No Man of Peace

GRIM and formidable, Colt Prosper leaned against the volcanic rock to steady the heavy six-shooter in his right hand. His face was also bearded, but that beard was like the wiry tangles of the badlands. His thumb notched back the hammer, and the Masked Rider knew that he would have to act fast.

Brad Blaine was within twenty yards of the hidden killer. Colt Prosper was pressing trigger when the Masked Rider's rifle barked flatly. The six-shooter in Prosper's hand exploded just as it jumped from his hand, and Brad Blaine stopped his horse with a sudden jerk.

Prosper screamed hoarsely as he was battered to the ground with a slug through the shoulder. Brad Blaine dug for his six-shooter as he reined down his plunging horse. He was about to blast a point-shot at the writhing body of the fallen outlaw when a stern clear voice spoke.

"Don't shoot, yearling! He's wounded bad. Just take his gun and hold him so!"

Brad Blaine swung down from his horse and advanced behind his cocked six-shooter. He could hear the thud of hoofs and then the tread of thin-soled boots. A moment later the Masked Rider appeared on a little shelf just a few feet above the trail. Ignoring young Blaine, the Masked Rider addressed the wounded outlaw.

"You better talk, Prosper. Did Twins McFee send you out to kill young Brad Blaine?"

Prosper glared and tightened his thin lips. Brad Blaine lashed out and kicked the extra six-shooter from the outlaw's left holster, helped Prosper to sit up against the tall rock, and waited for him to speak.

"I ain't talking," Prosper growled. "You heard what McFee said back yonder. You shot me on a sneak, you blasted long-rider!"

"I shot you in the shoulder," the Masked Rider admitted. "You were lining your sights on young Blaine, and he didn't even know you were near. Sometimes a man's got to fight fire with fire, and this time you got burned!"

Colt Prosper began to droop, and then he slipped to the side. The Masked Rider watched while Brad Blaine leaned over to examine the wounded outlaw. Blaine straightened up and set his jaw.

"He's fainted from bullet-shock, mister," he said harshly. "You called me a yearling!"

The Masked Rider stared down at the angry resentful face of the young Mormon. Then he smiled and waved a careless hand.

"Sorry," he said evenly. "But aren't you?"

"And you shot him in the back!" Brad Blaine continued. "That ain't the way I've heard the stories about the Masked Rider!"

The Masked Rider set his lips and took a deep breath.

"You listen to me, cowboy," he said sternly. "This drygulcher had you under his sights, and his finger pressing the trigger. I tried to beat him to the shot, and his slug knocked your hat off!"

"That's the way you tell it," Blaine said acidly. "I can take care of myself!"

"Have it your way, yearling," the Masked Rider said slowly. "So after this you take care of yourself. You've got to take this owlhooter back to the Rafter R, and don't forget what happened when you were taking that old Rafter R cowhand home after he was shot up!"

Brad Blaine growled in his throat and slapped for the gun in his holster. A rushing body lanced down on him, tore the leaping pistol from his hand, and bore him to earth. Then the Masked Rider leaped to his feet and waited for Brad Blaine to arise.

BRAD BLAINE rolled over and up. He balled his fists and rushed at the Masked Rider with both arms flailing. He was stopped in his tracks when a rocky fist whizzed out and clipped him on the chin, and the young Mormon grunted and sprawled on the grass. The Masked Rider had pulled his punch just in time, but Brad Blaine sat up shaking his head from side to side.

"I ain't never had enough fight!" he shouted, and pushed up to his feet.

The Masked Rider grinned then. He stuck out his left boot and stepped aside as young Blaine rushed him. Blaine sprawled again, rolled to his feet, and whirled around. Two strong hands caught his arms and vised down hard. Blaine tried to free himself, but he was powerless to move.

The Masked Rider held his grip and stared into the pain-racked face. He tightened his steely muscles a trifle more, and Brad Blaine moaned softly.

"I cave!" he gasped. "You're breaking my arms!"

The Masked Rider relaxed his hold some, then released the Double B cowboy, and stepped back a pace.

"Now you just take it easy until you get your growth," he said gruffly. "You're big for tall, but you ain't growed wide enough yet for stout. That's for why I called you yearling, and I'm sorry if it hurt your pride."

"You should have slapped me to sleep, Masked Rider," the cowboy murmured humbly. "I see it all now, and I'm sorry I talked out of turn. He'd have killed me if you hadn't spoiled his aim!"

"Yeah, and that's the first time I ever shot a man when he wasn't facing me," the Masked Rider said, and his tone was regretful. "He's one of Twins McFee's gang, and you better take him to Ranson on the Rafter R. I can't ride with you, so you holster you six-shooter and keep your eyes wide open. We'll boost this hombre on his horse, tie his left hand to the nubbin, and you lead his horse. Yonder it is tied back in the brush."

Brad Blaine flushed as he stooped to pick up his gun. He holstered the weapon, hurried to the outlaw's horse, and led it close to the wounded man. The Masked Rider stooped and caught a hold, lifted Prosper easily to the saddle, and told Blaine to pass a rope around one boot and under the belly of the horse.

Colt Prosper groaned and sat up just as Blaine finished fastening his left wrist to the saddle-horn. The Masked Rider was gone, and Prosper saw Brade Blaine climbing the saddle on his Double B roan.

"Turn me loose, yuh dang button!" Prosper shouted angrily.

Brad Blaine colored with anger and spurred his horse. Colt Prosper was jolted hard when his own horse leaped ahead, and young Blaine snarled at him from up in the lead.

"You call me a button again, I'll untie you and put a gun in your other hand!"

Colt Prosper stared and then lowered his head. Brad Blaine tied the lead reins to his saddle-horn, glared at the wounded man, and started for the Rafter R.

The Masked Rider smiled as he rode through the dense brush, walked Midnight through the creek and parted the brush. He watched some birds for a moment, and then rode into the cave. He dismounted, stripped his saddle-gear, and led the black stallion to the back of the cave. Then he removed the cape and mask, rolled them into a bundle, and hid them on a shelving overhang. The black Stetson followed, and then a battered gray Stetson was snugged down in the dark.

Now it was Wayne Morgan who saddled the Rafter R horse and reached for the meat sandwiches in his saddle-bags. He thought of old Rawhide Clancy and his pard, Coosa Evans. Good cook, old Coosa. Morgan ate his cold meal hurriedly, drank at the creek, and again watched the birds in the jack-pines. It didn't pay to get careless, and a moment later he rode out of the cave on the Rafter R horse.

AFTER crossing the creek, Morgan rode fast on the plain trail left by Brad Blaine and his captive. Blaine would be riding at a walk, and he should overtake him close to the road leading down to the S Bar C. He figured he had covered two miles when he climbed a little rise and saw Blaine and the prisoner a short distance ahead.

Blaine drew his gun and glared when Morgan rode up, but Morgan smiled and then studied the prisoner.

"Nice going, Blaine," he praised warmly. "You got yoreself an outlaw, and looks like you threw off your shot and just winged him through the shoulder." He stared at Blaine's six-shooter and shook his head. "Your gun hasn't been fired recent," he corrected himself.

"Ride on," Blaine growled. "He's my prisoner, and I don't need any help!"

"But you do," Morgan contradicted. "There's two S Bar C men waiting around the bend. You ride on and I'll stay back to see what happens."

Brad Blaine growled, hesitated, then put away his gun. Morgan shook his head, and Blaine started his horse. Morgan followed at a distance, and he heard the stick-up command.

"Hands high, kid. You're covered.

Morgan smiled coldly and moved up in a crouch. He saw the two men holding Brad Blaine under their guns, and then he saw that Blaine was losing his head. He was going to make it a fight to prove his courage!

Morgan snapped a shot at the nearest cowboy's boot. The S Bar C man spilled to the ground with the heel missing from his

boot, and his gun flipped into the brush as he fell.

"Drop it!" Morgan warned the other man. "Before I drop you!"

The cowboy stared at Morgan and dropped his gun to the ground. He raised his hands shoulder-high, and Brad Blaine swiftly drew his six-shooter.

"Now talk," he said grimly. "You threw down on me, you and your sneaking pard!"

The S Bar C man ignored young Blaine. He turned to Wayne Morgan and spoke quietly.

"You're Morgan," he stated positively. "We didn't mean to do this yearlin' any harm, but we rode up to see what he was doing with one of our S Bar C hands. We'll take him back with us, and no harm done that I can see."

"No, you don't!" Blaine shouted. "This hombre is going back to the Rafter R with me!"

"Look, Morgan," the cowboy said slowly. "I'm Joe Purdue, and this here is Clay Sims. That wounded feller on the hoss, is Jim Jones, and he's on Sam Clanton's payroll, too."

"Pay no mind to them two, Morgan," Blaine cut in roughly. "This jasper is an owlhooter by the name of Colt Prosper. He tried to bushwhack me back a ways, and he'd have shot me out of the saddle if the Masked Rider hadn't seen him hiding in the brush. The Masked Rider told me to take Prosper to Rob Ranson on the Rafter R, and that's where I'm taking him!"

"You heard what Blaine said," Morgan told the S Bar C men. "Any corrections or additions?"

The S Bar C men exchanged glances and remained silent. Morgan watched with a smile curling his lips, but the six-shooter in his hand never wavered. He knew that Brad Blaine resented the fact that he had spoken about his un-fired gun, and then one of the cowboys cleared his throat.

"The Masked Rider, you said?" he asked young Blaine. "You say he winged Jim Jones?"

"You both heard me, and I didn't say Jim Jones!" Blaine growled savagely. "This hombre is Colt Prosper, and he didn't aim to give me a chance for fight!"

"The Masked Rider," Morgan took up the conversation. "You know him, Blaine?"

"Know him?" Blaine repeated. "Me and the Masked Rider is just like this," and he held up two fingers close together.

Wayne Morgan listened and repressed a smile. Purdue shrugged his shoulders and said mebbe they had made a mistake. He started for his horse, but Brad Blaine stopped him.

"Hold on a minute, feller! If this hombre is a pard of yores, mebbe me and Morgan had better take you in too!"

"I didn't lose them," Morgan cut in quickly. "And you're not wearing a law-star, Blaine. I'll trail along with you to the Rafter R, but put up yore gun and let these cowhands get about their work. We all make mistakes!"

"We're making one by letting them two go if they are pards with Prosper," Blaine complained, but he holstered his gun. "Git long gone!" he told the two men. "But I aim to tell Rob Ranson about this play of yours!"

Morgan grinned as he walked back up the trail and mounted his horse. The S Bar C men were spurring away when he rejoined Brad Blaine who glared at him and told him to bring up the drag.

"What put you on the prod thisaway?" Morgan asked lightly.

"My business!" Blaine snapped. "And none of yours!"

"Now hold up for a spell, cowboy," Morgan said sharply. "After all, I got there in time to lend you a mite of help when you needed it."

"Thanks!" Blaine barked back at him. "I'll do as much for you one of the days. And if Rob Ranson gets salty with me, he'll find out I'm no man of peace!"

CHAPTER IX

The Hidden Joker

NOT much time was wasted in getting to the ranch. Rob Ranson was talking to the cattle buyer when Morgan and young Blaine rode into the Rafter R yard with Colt Prosper. Crail Towers tilted his expensive Stetson to the back of his head, took the unlighted cigar from his mouth, and glanced at Ranson.

Brad Blaine rode to the tie-rail and swung to the ground. Then he faced Ranson and jerked his head toward his prisoner.

"This hombre is Colt Prosper," he said

gruffly. "He laid back and was fixing to shoot me out of my saddle, but the Masked Rider got him just in time. He told me to bring Prosper to you; he's one of the McFee gang!"

His voice was rough, and his attitude was salty as he talked down to the Rafter R owner, and Ranson's face flushed with anger.

"And Morgan?" he asked Blaine. "Did he have to rescue you again?"

"Just a minute, boss," Morgan interrupted, when Brad Blaine stiffened. "Two S Bar C hands jumped Brad, and all I did was to make it evens. Two of them; two of us. They claimed Prosper was an S Bar C hand by the name of Jim Jones, but I talked them out of it."

"Did you see Sam Clanton?" Crail Towers asked.

Morgan hesitated, studied the cattle buyer's face, and evaded the question. "Not on the S Bar C road, but you better look after Prosper or call a doctor. After we get Prosper bedded down in the bunkhouse, I'd like to talk with you, Ranson."

"Doc White from Purgatory is looking after Rawhide, and he can fix Prosper up," Ranson answered. "Did you find that owlhoot hideout, Morgan?"

"I know about where it is," Morgan answered guardedly, and Ranson knew then that he would not talk in front of Crail Towers.

"Curt Caldwell and Marian are in the house," Ranson said. "Let's go in, and you can tell all of us what you found out."

"I'd like to sit in," Towers requested. "I've got a big stake here in the Strip, and if I help you cattlemen, I'll be helping myself!"

"Good idea," Ranson agreed. "We will start driving our shippers this week, and we are all in this thing together."

Brad Blaine declared himself in. "I'm repping for the Double B and I'll be mighty glad to see Marian again."

"Let's get Prosper out of the saddle and into the bunkhouse," Morgan suggested, when he saw Ranson frown. "The talking can wait that long."

Brad Blaine walked stiff-legged to the outlaw's horse, threw off the ties, and Morgan lifted Prosper from the saddle. The wounded man was weak from loss of blood, and Blaine and Morgan half carried him to the long bunkhouse.

Coosa Evans was helping the little grizzled doctor with Rawhide. Evans told Morgan supper would be ready in an hour, and Morgan nodded. Morgan was trying to figure out how much he should tell, and the best way to tell it. There was a leak somewhere in Purgatory Valley; someone was supplying Twins McFee with information about the cattlemen and their plans.

Once more he was faced with the difficult problem of maintaining his dual personality. Then he remembered what Blue Hawk had told him about a secret trail into the outlaw valley from the west end. Morgan drew a deep breath of relief and walked from the bunkhouse with Brad Blaine.

Curtis Caldwell greeted him warmly as the two men entered the big room of the ranchhouse. Marian Caldwell nodded a greeting, and Brad Blaine approached the girl eagerly. He took her left hand and looked searchingly into her eyes.

"I'm so glad you are safe, Marian honey," he said earnestly.

MARIAN smiled, and then she bit her lip and tried to release her hand when she saw the scowl on Ranson's face. Curt Caldwell smiled broadly and walked squarely between his daughter and young Blaine.

"The meeting is called to order," he said, and now his face was stern. "What did you find out back yonder, Morgan?"

"Sam Clanton is dead!" Morgan announced gruffly. He raised a hand when the men stared at him. "I didn't do it," he explained hurriedly. "Twins McFee rubbed Clanton out, and it was a cold-blooded killing. The Masked Rider tried to save Clanton but, as you know, McFee is a two-gun man!"

"Clanton dead," Crail Towers muttered. "I had a deal to buy his shippers. Who is taking over the S Bar C?" he asked Morgan.

"Towers, I'm just working here for the Rafter R," Morgan answered. "Ranson or Caldwell will know more about Clanton's relatives than I do, and mebbe they can tell you!"

"No call to get huffy," Towers said coldly. "You're pretty much of a stranger in these parts yourself!"

"Yeah, so don't ask me so many questions!" Morgan retorted.

"Hold it!" Ranson interrupted, and he addressed himself to Morgan. "You say you saw the Masked Rider?" he asked.

Here was the delicate balance which had worried Wayne Morgan. His explanation would also strengthen his ability to seem

to be in two places at the same time. He saw Crail Towers lean forward to listen, but Morgan ignored the cattle buyer and talked to Ranson and Caldwell.

"There's a little valley out there in the badlands," he began. "The trail from the east is well guarded, and the valley is entirely surrounded by cliffs. That's the hideout of Twins McFee and his gang. I kept to the brush and rode clear around, and I found another entrance by accident. I couldn't get all the way through, but I found a place where I could watch everything that went on without being seen!"

Then he told about Sam Clanton and Twins McFee, and the part Colt Prosper had played in the tragedy. He explained about the shot that had knocked the right-hand gun from McFee's hand, and Crail Towers shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Then you didn't see this Masked Rider," he said to Morgan. "You sure it wasn't you who fired that shot at McFee?"

Wayne Morgan came slowly to his feet. His rugged face was stern and hard, and his blue eyes were blazing.

"Listen, Mister!" he told the cattle buyer. "I don't know you, and you don't know me very well. I didn't hear that shot, and I didn't actually see the Masked Rider. I'm reporting to the man who pays me my wages, and that man isn't you. You want to pick that up, or let it lay where it fell?"

"No hard feelings, Morgan," Towers hastened to murmur. "I get around all over this country, and I was just trying to clear this thing up!"

"I accept yore apology!" Morgan said shortly, and turned again to Ranson. "McFee has nine men in his gang, not counting himself," he reported. "If we can't run them out, we can at least hold them there in the outlaw valley while you men make yore drives to the loading cars!"

"But we need most of our men for the drives," Ranson objected.

HE GLARED at Brad Blaine when the young Mormon cleared his throat. Blaine was sitting near Marian Caldwell, and all eyes turned to him.

"I've got a plan that might work," young Blaine said earnestly. "As you know, the Double B hands don't let on to be fighters," he stated. "That is, except me," and now he stared hard at Rob Ranson. "Our men can help with the drives, while you Strip fellers do the fighting back there in the badlands. We have ten men on the Double B, not counting Dad and me, and it won't take more than three to hold our gather. That leaves seven to help with the drives, and I'll help with the fighting!"

"That helps a lot in solving one of yore problems, Ranson," Morgan agreed quickly. "Five or six men can keep those outlaws from riding out of their hideout, while the rest of you get yore cattle to the loading cars."

"Thanks, Blaine," Rob Ranson said reluctantly. "We'll get all our fighting men ready early in the morning. If we can get our steers on the cars before any more are rustled, we can make it through this winter."

Crail Towers said he would be riding along to see some of the smaller cattlemen. Curt Caldwell told his daughter to get ready for the ride back to the Triangle C, and Brad Blaine said he'd get on back to the Double B to get his crew ready, and to talk things over with his father.

Wayne Morgan avoided Marian Caldwell and went out to put up his horse. Then he walked to the bunkhouse and filled a basin with cold water. He shaved hurriedly, dried his face, and was ready to eat when Coosa Evans rattled a spoon against a pie tin.

Big Sam Johnson sat next to Morgan, and when they had finished the main meal and were waiting for pie and coffee, the lanky Rafter R man leaned close to Morgan.

"I know that badlands country back there, Morgan," he said slowly. "That little valley sets right up again the Vermillion Cliffs, but a man can't get up on that side, leastwise with a horse. I wonder how this Masked Rider got up there?"

Morgan listened with his head lowered. Tad Fowler was also listening with his eyes staring at his plate. Morgan knew working cowboys and their habits.

"I didn't hear the shot or see any smoke up there," he said slowly. "But I did see the gun flip from McFee's hand, and I heard him shout up at the Masked Rider."

"A man could climb part way up that cliff, but he'd be an easy target for any one in Outlaw Valley," Fowler said thoughtfuly. "Now say we bottle up the McFee gang; we won't be able to smoke 'em out regardless!"

"Unless we could really get in that back trail Morgan found," Johnson added. "There was one place where there used to be an old deer-run, but a slide blocked

off the trail several years ago. Mebbe that's the one you found, Morgan."

Coosa Evans brought green apple pie and a steaming pot of coffee. He told them that Rawhide Clancy was sitting up in his bunk, and guarding Colt Prosper with his old Peacemaker .45 in his fist.

"Eating his heart out because he can't ride with Morgan and help round up those rustlers," Coosa added with a grin.

Morgan smiled and attacked his big slab of pie. He wanted time to think, and he was making a plan of his own. A plan which he would not divulge even to Rob Ranson until the time was right. Old Coosa told Morgan that Ranson wanted to see him in the house before he turned in for the night, and after downing his coffee, Morgan put on his hat and walked outside.

Night had settled down while the crew was eating, but Morgan could hear the saddle-stock in the big corrals. Most of the shipping cattle had been gathered, but it would require a sizeable cavvy to make the drive to the cattle cars at Purgatory.

ROB RANSON was waiting in the big front room, and he motioned Morgan to sit on the cowskin couch beside him. The young Rafter R owner's face was serious as he eyed Morgan for a long moment.

"You didn't tell it all, Wayne," he said at last. "I had a feeling that you didn't want to talk in front of the others. You want to tell me now?"

Morgan nodded emphatically. "I'm new here," he began slowly, and then his jaw thrust out. "Perhaps that is why I can see the whole picture more clearly," he continued. "You've got a lot to lose, Ranson. I'll tell you what I was holding back, but if I were you, I'd keep it strictly to myself!"

"I had it figured that way, Morgan," Ranson answered slowly. "I'll keep it to myself."

"There's a joker in the deck somewhere," Morgan stated. "We can't find that joker by looking for it, but we can watch for it to turn up in the deal. I mean the S Bar C. We don't know where the leak is down here, but we can find out almost for shore when we know who the new owner of the S Bar C is!"

Rob Ranson stared, and Morgan repeated the conversation he had heard between Sam Clanton and Twins McFee. Ranson listened intently, and then smote his thigh.

"That's the key, Morgan! Curt Caldwell ought to know about it, and Crail Towers!"

Morgan shook his head slowly. "Don't tell them or Mormon Blaine either," he cautioned.

"I won't tell the Blaines," Ranson growled. "Look Wayne; I'm going to be busy getting the drive started, and I want you to ramrod the fighting men. If you can keep McFee bottled up until we load our shipping steers, we will then bring every man in the Strip and clean out that whole gang!"

Morgan nodded and stood up. "I'll be turning in," he said quietly. "And don't tell any one what I said about that joker in the deck."

CHAPTER X

Utah Stampede

QUICKLY Wayne Morgan sat up in his bunk and reached for the battered old Stetson. He had been awakened by the thud of galloping hoofs racing into the big Rafter R yard, and he recognized Brad Blaine's voice shouting for him to come a-running. Blaine didn't call for Rob Ranson, but the Rafter R owner ran from the big house as Morgan and Tad Fowler raced from the bunkhouse.

Three big men were sitting their sweating horses near the bunkhouse, and all wore long silky beards to stamp them as Mormons. Brad Blaine was coming to meet Morgan, and he shouted his news without waiting for Ranson to come close.

"Our shippers have been stampeded, Morgan! We had three men holding the gather, and the raiders struck at midnight. They scattered our stuff all over Utah!"

"You heard, boss?" Morgan said to Ranson, who had now joined them. "It will take Blaine a week to round up his steers, and that means his men can't come here to help you and Caldwell with yore drives!"

"It means you will have to fight those outlaws short-handed," Ranson said hoarsely, and he turned to Blaine. "Did you see any of those raiders?" he asked sharply.

"Elder Thompson was on guard with two men, and he said they were part of the McFee gang," Blaine answered sullenly. "They rattled slickers and shot off their

six-shooters behind the herd, and we were holding about fifteen hundred head out on the flats!"

"It lacks an hour to daylight," Morgan said, after a glance at his silver watch. "Any day orders, Ranson?"

"Caldwell's Triangle C crew will be here at sun-up," Ranson answered slowly. "We were going to move my Rafter R steers first, because we are closer to the badlands. Curt said he could spare three men to help hold those rustlers in Outlaw Valley, and you can take Sam Johnson with you."

Another horse raced into the yard, and Morgan recognized the rider as Tom Tucker, who had been riding circle around the Rafter R herd of shipping beef. Tucker shouted excitedly as he slid his lathered horse to a stop.

"Get the men out, boss!" Tucker yelled. "Our herd was stampeded and I couldn't hold them with those two half-grown boys Curt Caldwell sent over. Three men rode into the bunch with their slickers rattling, and their six-shooters roaring!"

Ranson groaned and stared at Morgan who spoke quietly to Tucker. "Which way did they run?"

"They tried to turn 'em toward the badlands," Tucker answered jerkily. "But me and the buttons managed to turn 'em in that trail leading to the S Bar C. I got one of the rustlers with my rifle. It was Jud Tolliver!"

"Tolliver was an S Bar C hand!" Ranson answered quickly. "That must mean that Twins McFee has taken over Sam Clanton's spread!"

"We better ride out there," Morgan suggested. "When the Triangle C crew gets here, we can eat first, and then the whole crew of us can go to the S Bar C. You will have to start rounding up your steers there, and I can ride on to Outlaw Valley with my fighting men."

Coal oil lamps were already burning in the cook-shack, and Coosa Evans was busy over his big stove. Ranson told Brad Blaine to tell his men to tie up their horses and light down for breakfast. Then the Triangle C crew rode into the yard, and Rob Ranson told Curt Caldwell what had happened.

"Twins McFee got wind of what we were going to do," Curt Caldwell said slowly. "I brought five extra men, Rob. Some of the smaller outfits sent reps to help, and we'll round up your critters if they haven't run too far. You got enough for us all to eat?"

"That makes twenty of us, counting Blaine's men," Ranson muttered. "I'll speak to Coosa."

COOSA EVANS said that he had been expecting a roundup crew, and to come and get it. The men gathered around the big table; grim-faced cowboys who listened without speaking. They realized that the showdown was here at last.

Curt Caldwell sat with Ranson and Morgan at the head of the long table. Ranson told Brad Blaine to move up closer for the council of war. Young Blaine smiled for the first time and took a chair beside Morgan.

"We need these men of yours, Brad," Ranson said slowly, and there was no edge in his voice. "After we gather up my Rafter R strays, we will help you round up your Double B beef. Yores ran the farthest, which means they lost good grass-fed flesh. You agreeable?"

"Like you said, Rob," Blaine answered quickly. "Mormon said we would hold our shippers a couple of weeks to get them in shape again. My three men will help you round up your stuff, but I want to ride with Morgan. That will also give him three more fighting men from the Triangle C."

"We will all be fighting men when we ride into the S Bar C," Morgan said grimly. "If Twins McFee took over, it means he will have most of his gang down there, and out of Outlaw Valley!"

"We've got most of the bigger boys riding herd on our gather," Curt Caldwell spoke up. "Some of them not more than fourteen years old, but they can hold that stuff while older men do the fighting!"

Coosa Evans had started serving with the help of two small boys. The hungry cowboys ate in silence. They were mostly big men who had been raised with cattle and horses. All were heavily armed, and most of them were covertly watching Wayne Morgan. When the meal was finished, they trooped outside and gathered around Morgan.

"Tell 'em," Rob Ranson whispered to Morgan. "You've seen both sides of this trouble, and you must have a plan!"

Morgan glanced at Caldwell, and then at Brad Blaine. "Suit you fellers?" he asked quietly.

"Suits me," Curt Caldwell agreed promptly.

"Bend the lead, Morgan," Blaine spoke up. "Anything you say!"

"Listen, men," Morgan addressed the group. "When we get within sight of the S Bar C, don't bunch up together. Fan out to thin the targets, and we'll ride in three parties, Brad Blaine with his men, Caldwell with his Triangle C crew, and the reps for the little outfits ride with Ranson and me. We will let Rob Ranson do the talking, but the rest of you men keep yore rifles in yore hands, and ready for war. Boots and saddles!"

There was a clanking of gear and the rattle of spurs as the fighting cowboys mounted their tough mountain horses. Wayne Morgan rode in the lead with Ranson, and they quit the Rafter R just as the first fingers of light were showing above the distant Vermillion Cliffs.

Morgan was lost in thought as they rode across the high desert range. Somewhere there had been another leak, and Twins McFee had struck the first blow. The Rafter R cattle would have been loaded on the cars at Purgatory within three days. Now they were scattered across S Bar C range which ran back into the lava badlands, and Crail Towers needed those steers.

They came to the forks in the trail where Morgan had rescued Brad Blaine from Joe Purdue and Clay Sims of the S Bar C. As the Masked Rider, he had heard McFee boast to Sam Clanton that McFee already had men on the S Bar C payroll.

Morgan turned in the S Bar C trail and rode closer to Ranson. Now it was broad daylight, and Ranson said the ranchhouse was just a mile up the trail. Morgan told him to take the lead, and he smiled coldly when he saw the other two parties spread out into separate groups.

The cowboys with Morgan hunted shelter behind trees and corrals where they could cover the rambling old house with their rifles. Morgan swung down behind a tool shed and ground-tied his horse with trailing whangs. Rob Ranson rode right up to the house and shouted loudly.

SEVERAL MEN came running from the bunkhouse with rifles in their hands. Morgan's eyes narrowed when he recognized two of them as outlaws he had seen in McFee's camp. Then he swung his head toward the house when two men walked out on the broad gallery. The two were Joe Purdue and Clay Sims.

"Thought you'd be riding over this away," Purdue said to Ranson. "One of my boys reported a stampede across our range early this morning, and those critters of yores high-tailed for the lavas!"

"I'd like to speak to Sam Clanton," Ranson said gruffly.

"You haven't heard?" Purdue asked quickly. "Sam got into a ruckus with Twins McFee because he rode down to try and join your association. Sam shot second," he explained with a shrug.

"You don't tell me!" Ranson ejaculated. "Poor old Sam killed by that rustling outlaw. What about the S Bar C, and his shipping steers?" he asked slowly.

"Well, you see, Sam counted on trouble with McFee," Purdue answered mournfully. "He's got kinfolks down in Texas, and he put me and Clay Sims in charge to sell his stuff. Sam had two cousins down there in Texas, and they will get here some time next week. Crail Towers will buy the steers."

Rob Ranson rubbed his chin, and Wayne Morgan mounted his Rafter R horse and rode to join the Rafter R owner. Ranson showed his relief, but Purdue scowled when he saw Morgan.

"Morning, Purdue, and you, Sims," Morgan spoke gruffly. "I heard what you said, so of course you won't have any objections to us rounding up our critters!"

"Why, none at all," Purdue agreed instantly. "I'd send some of my boys to help you, but we're making a drive today."

"Thought mebbe some of yore stuff got scattered too," Morgan spoke carelessly. "Where you shipping from?"

"Two drives," Purdue answered reluctantly. "Part of them going to Saint George, and the rest to Purgatory. We made arrangements with Crail Towers for the cars last week."

Rob Ranson stared, but Morgan turned quickly and told him to call the working crews. Purdue and Sims glared as the heavily-armed cowboys rode out from cover, but Ranson shouted orders and spurred out of the big yard with Morgan at his side.

"Something funny here, Ranson," Morgan said in a low voice, when they were out of sight of the house. "Mormon Blaine had those Saint George cars ordered for his stock, and the cars in Purgatory were for yore Rafter R steers. As soon as you get the boys started, you better hunt up Crail Towers and have a talk with him."

"And you," Ranson said. "You still going to ride to Outlaw Valley?"

Morgan nodded. "But I won't need any help today," he added quickly. "I want to

make shore about that McFee gang first. I counted two of his men back there on the S Bar C, and if McFee has taken over that spread as he told Clanton, more of his men will be helping with those two drives. I've been thinking, Ranson," he said hesitantly.

"You come up with something?" Ranson asked hopefully.

Morgan nodded. "It's dangerous, but sometimes you have to fight fire with fire," he answered slowly. "How long will it take that S Bar C outfit to make their drives to the rail-heads?"

"Three days to Purgatory, and the same to Saint George," Ranson answered promptly. "So's the cattle won't lose flesh."

"It don't take much to stampede a herd at midnight," Morgan said bluntly, and he stared hard at Ranson.

"You mean—to stampede the S Bar C drives?" Ranson whispered.

"That's just what I mean," Morgan answered harshly. "This whole ruckus up here is a battle to see who will control Purgatory Valley after shipping season. Sam Clanton had lent money to several of the smaller outfits, and that means if they can't pay up, those two cousins from Texas will take over. If we keep that outlaw outfit busy enough, they can't cash in on yore losses. They ship their cattle in the cars ordered for you and Mormon Blaine, and then they will be free to see that you men never ship yore steers!"

Rob Ranson stared at his saddle-horn, and then nodded his head. "Old Coosa Evans will be coming along soon with the chuckwagon," he told Morgan. "We'll camp out there in the lavas somewhere tonight, and I'll be waiting for you. Like you said, we will fight fire with fire!"

CHAPTER XI

Gun Pride

ONE KEEN glance back along the back trail told Wayne Morgan that he was being followed when he rode past the little mesa where Blue Hawk had made his camp in the dry cave. Occasionally he heard the faint mournful cry of a burrow owl, returning late from a nocturnal hunt. There was too much at stake now to risk a talk with the Yaqui, but Morgan knew that his faithful ally would be at his back.

He rode to the foot of Vermillion Cliffs and broke a twig with his right hand. Morgan continued on through the twisting mazes, circling toward the south. He sent his Rafter R horse up a steep trail to a little mesa, stopped the horse for a blow, and reached for the glasses in his saddle-bags.

Cupping them to his eyes, Morgan scanned the west slope of the cliffs which surrounded Outlaw Valley. Sam Johnson had spoken of a rock slide which blocked an old deer trail. Morgan drew a quick breath and focused on a white slash in the red crumpling walls. Then he cased the glasses and returned them behind his cantle, sent his horse down the trail, and rode toward the shaly scab-rock slide.

He tied his horse to a 'squite bush where the beans were plentiful for forage. Then he started up the slide, and he stopped to study the half-buried trail. The marks of shod hoofs showed here and there, and Morgan made his way up to the place where the slide had started.

He flattened out on the ground and listened with his ear pressed to the rocky trail. He could hear nothing to disturb the drowsy stillness of mid-morning, and he continued his difficult climb. He knew that a horse could slide down the steep trail on its tail, but he also knew that it would be impossible to ride a horse up that same route of escape.

Morgan reached the top and flattened out on his stomach. He could look across the little valley which he judged to be about a mile long. At the eastern end where the trail entered Outlaw Valley, he could make out the figures of two mounted men guarding the pass. Morgan shifted his glance to the half-hidden house built into the cliff, and he saw another pair of horses tied to the rail near the place where Sam Clanton had fought the uneven duel with Twins McFee.

This, he told himself, was the hidden trail Twins McFee would use for escape if his men were ever overpowered from the east. He was about to retrace his steps when a purring voice spoke softly from just above his hiding place.

"Do not move, Senor Morgan! Put your hands behind the back, or I will shoot a hole through the head, I theenk!"

Wayne Morgan remained absolutely still. Then he turned his head slightly and looked up. A handsome Mexican was smiling down at him from a rocky shelf just above the trail, and a cocked six-shooter

was pointing squarely at Morgan's head. Full red lips smiled at him; lips with a little black mustache forming a V under the long straight nose.

"Put the hands behind your back, Senor," the Mexican dandy repeated softly. "Senor McFee would talk with you before he kills you. Onless you wish for to die pronto, Senor?"

Wayne Morgan did not argue. He put his hands behind his broad back, felt a small noose encircle the right wrist, and then three swift wraps and a tie around both wrists. A gun muzzle poked him in the small of the back.

"Arise, Senor," his captor purred gently. "We will take the little walk, no?"

"But yes," Morgan answered drily, but inwardly he was castigating himself for carelessness. A man on the rimrock could watch the trails below, just as he had watched them from the cave in the Vermillion Cliffs. Morgan sucked in a quick breath and then controlled himself. Blue Hawk would see the broken twig in the trail, and take his post on the hidden shelf. But how could the faithful Yaqui help him now?

MORGAN remembered the uneven duel between Sam Clanton and Twins McFee. He wondered if the outlaw leader would give him a chance, and he also wondered why the Mexican had not relieved him of his guns.

"I am Manuel Pasqual," the Mexican murmured. "I tell you because you will never leave this place, Senor. I am very fast with the gun, Senor Morgan. If Senor McFee would only give me the chance to match your speed?"

Wayne Morgan made no answer. He walked with head erect, descended the rough trail, and started across the valley floor. He stared at a small herd of grazing steers, yearlings with a new brand burned on the left shoulders. The S Bar C, and Morgan knew that they had been branded but recently.

A tall man came out of the little house and shaded his eyes. Then Twins McFee shifted the six-shooters on his powerful legs, cuffed the Stetson to the back of his head, and came down to the tie-rail. He watched until Morgan stopped about ten paces away, and the outlaw spoke quietly.

"We were expecting you, Morgan. So you rescued the young Mormon, and turned Colt Prosper over to Rob Ranson!"

Morgan nodded. He was studying the handsome outlaw carefully. The long-fingered hands that should have belonged to a gambler. The bold restless gray eyes and erect carriage of a man born to lead other men.

"I don't believe you are as fast as they say," McFee said bluntly. "Not fast enough for me to waste my time, but I have a curiosity."

His right hand moved down like a flashing beam of sunlight. Caught the heavy gun from the holster with thumb earing back the hammer on the swift effortless draw. McFee smiled and covered Morgan; spoke to the Mexican dandy.

"You have earned a reward, Manuel Pasqual," he said slowly, "like one who bestows a rare favor. "Untie our friend, and I will give the go-ahead. If he is the fastest, you will not die alone, amigo!"

Wayne Morgan felt the piggin' string jerked from his wrists. He raised his hands and slowly rubbed his wrists. Manuel Pasqual soberly stepped off ten paces, drew a line with the thin sole of his boot, and spoke softly.

"You will attend me, Senor Morgan. One time down in Texas you killed my cousin. I have waited long for this wonderful opportunity to meet you, as Ramon met you in Matagordos!"

Wayne Morgan knew that he was waging a losing fight. Twins McFee had made no secret of his plans. If Pasqual shot second, Twins McFee would shoot third. The outlaw would get that third shot away before Wayne Morgan could ear back the hammer of his bucking gun.

Morgan did not turn to face the eager Mexican. He knew that McFee would resort to some trickery, and was merely satisfying his strange thirst for blood. He remained quiet, staring at the darkly handsome face of the man who boasted that he was the fastest gunswift in all the Arizona strip.

"I don't believe you are so fast," Morgan murmured just above his breath, and a hard smile twitched his lips at the change which came over the outlaw.

Twins McFee trapped his lips together and set his even white teeth. The fingers of his left hand began to twitch, and Morgan added fuel to the outlaw's anger.

"That pain in yore hand," he said smoothly. "Yore fingers tingle, and yore muscles swell with power and desire. Desire to feel the kick of a bucking gun against yore palm; an ache that nothing else will cure!"

Twins McFee stopped scowling, and all his muscles relaxed. He leaned forward a trifle, and he even smiled as he nodded his well-shaped head.

"How did you know?" he whispered. "How could you tell?"

"I've been told about it often," Morgan answered earnestly. "You only feel it when you meet a master with his tools. It's a true sign, and you know you are never wrong!"

"But you are wrong!" McFee declared arrogantly. "I feel it only when I hear the name of the—Masked Rider!"

"I'd like to be there when you meet him," Morgan said wistfully. "There won't be the flick of an eyelid between you two!"

"Just a flicker—in my favor!" McFee said confidently. "If he were faster than me, I wouldn't want to live!"

"You won't!" Morgan snapped.

TWINS McFEE lowered his gun. "You know him?" he asked eagerly. "You have seen him work?"

"I've seen him work," Morgan answered honestly. "He is much faster than—Sam Clanton!"

Once again that terrible anger leaped to McFee's wide gray eyes. His nostrils flared widely, and then his eyes narrowed.

"What do you know about Sam Clanton?" he demanded.

"Only what Joe Purdue told me," Morgan answered with a shrug, and he had to fight hard to keep his suppressed anger. "We rode past the S Bar C this morning, and Purdue told Ranson that he and Sims had taken over. Said you and Clanton had a gun ruckus, and that Sam held a busted flush, open at both ends!"

"So Ranson rode up to the S Bar C," McFee drawled slowly. "I'm glad you told me."

"You'd have found out," Morgan answered.

McFee straightened and a cruel smile spread across his smooth face. "Turn and face Manuel!" he ordered. "I give no man an even break until I settle with the Masked Rider!"

Wayne Morgan sighed. He knew that he had used up all his time, and some that he had borrowed. He was about to turn when a clear strong voice spoke from out of the air.

"Do not give the order, McFee. I have you under my sights, and this time I will not shoot at your pistol!"

McFee whirled and glanced at the ring of cliffs which surrounded the valley. Wayne Morgan swallowed hard. The voice he had heard was that of the Masked Rider, and then he shook his head to stop the move that would have turned his eyes toward the trail at the head of the hidden cave.

"Show yourself, Masked Rider!" McFee called loudly. "Or I will give Manuel Pasqual the go-ahead!"

"*Si, senor!*" the Mexican pleaded. "I have the ache in my hand like you have said!"

"Call him off, McFee," Morgan warned softly. "You live for the day when you will match guns with a faster man than yoreself. Would you spoil it all just to see me die?"

Twins McFee was still searching the cliffs with narrowed eyes. Then he shrugged and faced back to Morgan.

"I'd turn you loose for now if I was sure!" he growled. "But how can I be sure?"

"Let me talk to him," Morgan suggested. "He won't have to answer but—*yes* or *no!*"

"No man talks for Twins McFee," the outlaw said proudly, and he turned to face the Vermillion Cliffs. "Name the time and place, hombre!" he shouted arrogantly. "For an even break on both sides, and no favors asked except a fair shake!"

Morgan strained forward to listen. He knew that Blue Hawk had the gift of mimicry; he had heard him imitate the voice of Sam Clanton that night on the line-shack on the S Bar C.

"You name it!" the answer came from out of the blue.

"Yonder!" McFee said, and pointed directly at the cliff. Then he turned slowly and stared hard at Wayne Morgan. He seemed to be making some mental calculation, and Wayne Morgan guessed shrewdly when the outlaw spoke again. "Three nights from today, at sundown!" McFee called. "At the foot of the trail where my men guard the pass from the east!"

"Tell him the deal is off unless I walk out free and ride away!" Morgan called swiftly, and he smiled when he saw the frown of disappointment on the face of Manuel Pasqual.

"You heard him, Manuel," McFee said sternly. "I'll kill the man who does anything to spoil that meeting. If you meet him tomorrow, let him have it!"

"Do you agree, Masked Rider?" Wayne Morgan asked clearly.

Silence for a moment, and then the answer came in a single word.

"Yes!"

Twins McFee smiled, and he swaggered with his wide shoulders. "We've both got it," he told Morgan. "What a man might call—gun pride!"

This time it was Wayne Morgan who turned his back squarely. He began to walk slowly toward the slash in the west wall of the valley where Manuel Pasqual had surprised and captured him. He heard the whine of poignant disappointment in the Mexican's throat, and the stern warning of Twins McFee.

"Let him go, amigo. Tomorrow is another day!"

Morgan crossed the valley and climbed the steep trail. Then he stopped and turned for the first time. Manuel Pasqual was riding furiously toward the eastern opening to the valley, and he flashed through the pass and was gone from sight.

CHAPTER XII

Fight Fire With Fire

BLUE HAWK called softly as Wayne Morgan stopped near the hidden cave in the Vermilion Cliffs, where he had broken the twig to direct the Indian.

"Manuel Pasqual will try to catch you again, Senor," Blue Hawk warned just above a whisper. "He will wait in the trail where it forks to the S Bar C."

"Thanks for what you did a while ago," Morgan answered guardedly. "For a moment I thought I heard myself speaking."

Blue Hawk parted the brush and smiled to show his pleasure. Then he was gone almost instantly, and Morgan nicked his horse with a spur and headed back toward the S Bar C.

Morgan rode at a lope through the catclaw and tangles of the badlands. Somewhere up ahead a killer awaited his coming, a man who demanded payment in blood. He had gone with the blessing of Twins McFee, and Wayne Morgan smiled coldly as he loosened the gun on his right leg.

When he reached the place where Colt Prosper had laid in wait for young Brad Blaine, Morgan reined down to a walk. He could almost picture Pasqual with his ear pressed to the ground. Morgan dismounted, tied his horse in the trail-side brush, and flexed the fingers of his right hand. Then he called in a loud clear voice.

"Step out, Manuel Pasqual. Yore hand has been hurting you long enough!"

Up ahead, a long shadow lanced out at the bend of the brushy trail. A sombrero poked around the bend, and Morgan laughed softly.

"Put on your hat and step out, Pasqual," he called chidingly.

The hat was jerked back, and Manuel Pasqual leaped into view. He landed lightly on the soles of his high-heeled boots, caught his balance, and snarled angrily because his deception had been so easily discovered.

"Peeg! Draw the gun!"

Wayne Morgan was watching the brown right hand. He did not speak again. A jealous killer from the past had sworn revenge; had ridden gun-sign on the victim who had cheated him a short hour ago.

Manuel Pasqual waited in a crouch. Then his right hand slapped down to his holster with the fingers clawed to fit the handles of his six-shooter.

Wayne Morgan watched with that cold detachment which comes to a man who has an unpleasant duty to perform, one he would rather avoid, but would fulfill with a cold purpose when the issue was forced upon him. His right hand whipped up like a flash of heat lightning, and pale flame lanced from the muzzle of his six-shooter.

Manuel Pasqual screamed and went to his knees. The six-shooter was still in his holster, but his gun-hand was a shattered helpless thing of bleeding flesh and broken bones. He cradled it against his bolero jacket as he rocked back and forth with moans of pain gusting from his lips.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he whispered. "I wonder if Senor McFee knew you were the fastest?"

"Get on yore horse and ride," Morgan said sternly. "Unless you think he will kill you!"

He backed into the brush while watching the wounded man, pulled the slip-knot on his bridle-reins, and mounted swiftly. He rode up the trail, looking down at Pasqual with no emotion visible on his rugged fighting face.

"Why did you not kill me, Senor?" the Mexican asked tearfully. "I would rather be dead!"

"I never kill a man when I am shore I

have him faded," Morgan answered quietly. "You brought me fight, but it didn't call for a killing. *Adios,* Manuel Pasqual!"

THEN he was around the bend in the trail with his horse in a gallop. A moment later he took the fork to the north, and rode across S Bar C range. Morgan caught a glimpse of a chuckwagon some two miles beyond the old ranchhouse, and Coosa Evans told him to rest his saddle and eat a bait of hot grub.

"You ran that hoss hard," the old cook said observantly. "Rob and the boys rode out not more than fifteen minutes ago, and they've rounded up quite a few of our shippers." He glanced at Morgan who was rubbing powder-smoke from his pistol. "You shoot a skunk?" he asked.

"No, this feller had the nerve right enough," Morgan answered, and told Coosa about his capture and subsequent fight with Manuel Pasqual.

Coosa came closer and tapped Morgan on the arm. "That S Bar C drive got under way toward Purgatory," he whispered hoarsely. "Rob says another bunch of about a thousand steers was being pushed toward Saint George over there in Utah!"

He ladled a plate of steaming beef stew in a bowl and handed it to Morgan who took it and sat down on his heels. Coosa handed him some thick slices of bread, and said there would be steak for supper. Morgan ate hungrily, washed the bowl in the wreck pan, and spoke carelessly.

"Should be a lot of night riders out tonight. Coosa, I'll get out there and make a hand. See you at supper."

After riding a mile, he came to two men who were holding a small herd of weary Rafter R cattle in a large blind draw. A cowboy told him that Ranson was up just ahead, and Morgan rode away with a wave of his hand.

Ranson rode out of the brush, hazing a steer. He stopped when he saw Morgan who quickly told his story. Ranson shuddered and gripped Morgan's arm.

"I don't want you to run any more such risks," he said earnestly. "After this you will take some one else along to guard yore back."

"I had some one and didn't know it," Morgan answered with a smile. "That's another one I owe the Masked Rider. Now I'll help you round up these weary strays, and they will have to be rested before they will be fit to travel."

The herd in the holding canyon took on sizeable proportions as the afternoon wore to a close. Morgan told Ranson that there were about six hundred head of steers under guard, and the two rode to the chuckwagon where old Coosa Evans was wrangling the grub wtih two half-grown boys for helpers.

Rob Ranson gave orders to his men for their trick of night-herding. All of the hard-eyed cowboys were on edge, and the wrangler had brought in the cavvy of saddle-stock. Night horses were roped out and saddled, and then the hungry crew sat on the ground with heaping plates of food on their knees.

Ranson finished his steak and leaned over to talk softly to Morgan.

"We'll leave those three big Mormons to guard the herd," he said slowly. "They will fight if they are attacked, but they won't take the offensive. That leaves sixteen of us to do our night work, and we'll split into two parties.

Morgan nodded his understanding. He glanced at young Brad Blaine who showed resentment at being left out of the con-

[*Turn page*]

"Better Not Go Back to the Rocking H, Feller! Bull Sanderson Won't Like It—an' He's One Tough Hombre!"

THAT'S the advice Ben Stuart got from an old pard when he approached his home ranch—but while he appreciated the warning, it didn't stop him! He knew the showdown with Bull Sanderson was coming sooner or later and he was ready for it!

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versation, and Morgan made a suggestion.

"Better let me ride with young Blaine across the Utah border, boss. Thataway, you and old Curt Caldwell can work together over here, and we'll hit both the S Bar C drives about the same time!"

Ranson nodded agreement, and then laughed shortly. "We're fighting fire with fire two ways," he said grimly. "Twins McFee meant to spilt up the Strip cattlemen, and then pick their bones one by one. We know that he means to pocket the money from those S Bar C shippers, and now we have his forces divided!"

The three Mormons rolled in their blankets just as darkness descended over the desert range. They would have to stand the watch from midnight to dawn, and Ranson called the rest of the crew together. He divided them into two parties, explained his plans, and told them to roll in and get some sleep.

COOSA EVANS made two huge pots of fresh coffee and banked his fires. The round-up camp became quiet, but the old cooky stood guard with a sawed-off shotgun in his gnarled hands, and his old six-shooter strapped outside his flour-sack apron. Just before midnight he called Ranson and Morgan who had gone to bed fully dressed, except for their Stetsons and boots.

The other men gathered around the banked fires and drank hot cowboy coffee. Six-shooters and rifles were inspected carefully, and Ranson passed out extra cartridges. Then the three Mormons rode out to relieve the Triangle C herders, and Morgan called his men together.

"We will follow Brad Blaine," he told his fighting crew. "He knows every draw and wallow across the Border, and remember what I said. Don't fire a shot until every man is in position. We'll stampede that Saint George herd from Hades to breakfast, and then get back here while that S Bar C crew is trying to mill 'em!"

Rob Ranson had given similar orders to his crew which would raid the drive headed for the cattle-cars at Purgatory. Wayne Morgan waved his arm and rode into the night with Brad Blaine, and Ranson started toward the east with his crew.

Brad Blaine waited until his eyes had shed the firelight and had become accustomed to the darkness. He told Morgan that he knew about where the S Bar C herd would be bedded down for the night.

"If I get Joe Purdue under my sights—" he muttered, and caressed the butt of his rifle.

"Since when have you turned bushwhacker?" Morgan asked coldly. "You'll shoot over the heads of the cattle, unless some of those herders see and attack us. Rob Ranson wants to keep Purdue and Sims alive, because they are repping for the new owners of the S Bar C!"

"Ranson!" Blaine snapped. "He won't be so brash if he meets up with Twins McFee!"

"The same goes for you!" Morgan answered grimly. "He's the fastest gunsharp I've ever seen, and you'd only be committing suicide. Now you keep yore mind on yore work and bend the lead to that trail drive!"

They rode in silence for an hour, with only the light of the stars to guide them. Brad Blaine sent his horse up a gentle rise, scanned the vast desert rangeland without being sky-lined, and rode down to join Morgan and the crew.

"They're bedded down just about a half mile ahead," he reported.

"Get your slickers ready!" Morgan ordered quietly. "See that the magazines in your rifles are loaded. When they are empty, use your six-shooters, and keep that herd running toward the badlands. Fan out now, and I'll be on the west side. I'll fire the first shot for a signal, and the rest of you know what to do!"

Riding through the night like silent noiseless phantoms, the raiders drew closer to the sleeping herd. Morgan counted four men riding circle around the S Bar C steers, and he could see the glow of embers from a banked camp-fire off to the left.

Now Morgan was between the fire and the herd. His yellow slicker was in his left hand, and he was about to give the signal when one of the S Bar C herders cut loose with his six-shooter.

Almost instantly, a circle of fire-flies flashed out as the Rafter R crew fired a blazing fusillade over the sleeping cattle. Then the night air was filled with the dry crackle of slickers as the raiders began their work. The cattle came to their feet with bellows of terror, and then they were in full flight as the roar of guns drove them to desperation.

Wayne Morgan closed in with his slicker rattling in his left hand. He almost collided with a big man on a plunging horse, and Morgan caught a glimpse of a bearded savage face as the herder fired point-blank

at him. Morgan's rifle barked twice, and the outlaw pitched from the saddle into the running herd.

MORGAN shoved his rifle down into the boot under his left fender and drew the six-shooter from his right leg. Now he was shouting as he closed in on the running steers, and his pistol roared like a cannon. All around the stampeding herd, six-shooters were stabbing into the sky.

Far to the rear, the campfire leaped to flame as fuel was thrown on the smoldering embers. Now the stampeding leaders were at the edge of the badlands, and Morgan drew his spare six-shooter. He sent three shots roaring into the air for a signal as he brought his sweating horse to a stop.

On came the thundering herd with riders at point and swing. Two men dropped out to join Morgan, and then two more rode over from the north.

The last man to join them was Brad Blaine, and he grinned at Morgan through the powder-grime and dust which streaked his sweating face.

"Sorry, but I had to tally for one of those rustlers," he told Morgan with grim satisfaction. "He nicked me first in the left shoulder," he added defensively.

"Let's get back to our own camp," Morgan answered quietly. "Take the lead, Blaine!"

Brad Blaine rode ahead with the silent crew following him. They reached the Rafter R camp two hours later, and Morgan saw Curt Caldwell and Rob Ranson sitting by the chuckwagon, drinking steaming coffee.

"We scattered that Saint George herd into the lavas," Morgan reported to Ranson. "How about you?"

"It will take them a week to round-up their stragglers," Ranson answered quietly. "I told the boys to roll into their soogans, because we've got a hard day ahead!"

"It won't take long to spend the rest of the night in this camp," old Coosa Evans remarked drily. "Just like when I was making a hand on the trail drives from Amarillo to Dodge!"

Wayne Morgan pulled off his boots and rolled up in a blanket. Soon the camp was quiet except for the snores of weary men, and the faint tinkle of pans as Coosa Evans started preparations for breakfast. Four trail herds of shipping steers had been scattered, and the cattle cars at the railheads were empty.

CHAPTER XIII

Not Fast Enough

PERCHED on his bed-roll, Brad Blaine was oiling his six-shooter when Morgan rolled out of his blankets. Coosa Evans was busy at the chuckwagon, and then Rob Ranson sat up. He watched Blaine for a moment with curling lips, but Morgan caught his eye and shook his head.

"Just in case Twins McFee rides gunsign on me for smoking down that rustling hand of his," Blaine said to Morgan.

Rob Ranson snorted and pulled on his boots. Curt Caldwell came around the wagon and sat down on Morgan's bed-roll. Morgan stared at the fire.

"Might as well make hay while the sun shines," he said slowly. "I mean those cattle cars are empty," he explained. "Which means Crail Towers should be riding out this way looking for some business."

"Hadn't thought of that," Ranson admitted. "We can start moving about seven hundred head along slow toward Purgatory."

"Mormon Blaine should have some of his stuff gathered," Morgan added. "And Towers will be glad to dicker now that bad luck overtook the S Bar C outfit."

The crew were rousing up, and Coosa Evans gave the call of the chuckwagon. "Come and git it, cowboys!"

Three men ate hastily and rode out to relieve the Mormons who had stood night herd. Breakfast was about over, and Ranson was giving day orders to the crew when Morgan spoke softly.

"Hold it a minute, boss. Yonder comes a visitor, and you might want to change yore orders!"

Ranson glanced up and followed the direction of Morgan's watchful eyes. A tall man was riding up the trail from the east, and he was chewing on an unlighted cigar.

"Howdy, Towers!" Ranson called a greeting. "Light down and rest yore saddle. You're just in time for breakfast!"

"Don't mind if I do," Crail Towers answered without hesitation. "Looks like you boys used some of those horses pretty hard last night," he remarked, as he glanced at the cavvy in the rope corral.

"Well, you know how it is, Crail," Curt Caldwell answered. "We stood night herd over what we've gathered, and then we rode to town to see how things were at home. You got something on yore mind to be out riding in the middle of the night your ownself?"

"Buying and shipping cattle is my business," Towers answered brusquely. "I make arrangements in advance of round-up, and I order cars as I need them. Now I've got a bunch of cars on two sidings, and nothing to put in them!"

"Sho' now," Caldwell murmured. "I thought you had a deal on the fire with the S Bar C?"

"So I did," Towers growled. "But both those trail drives were scattered to high heaven last night. Of course you fellows wouldn't know anything about it!"

"Of course not," Ranson agreed carelessly. "So you were saying?"

"How many head have you got gathered?" Towers demanded.

"About seven hundred," Ranson answered. "Why?"

"Start moving 'em to Purgatory," Towers said, and his tone was almost savage. "I can ship that S Bar C stuff later, when they round up the critters!"

Wayne Morgan shifted and spoke up. "How many head you reckon yore Double B crew has rounded up, Brad?" he asked the young Mormon.

"Mebbe three-four hundred," Brad Blaine took his cue. "And we have enough men to handle them on a drive to Saint George!"

"I'll take 'em!" Towers almost shouted. "I don't aim to have a range war ruin my business. You fellows can fight it out among yourselves, and I'll buy the steers that get to the cars first!"

WAYNE MORGAN studied Towers for a moment or two.

"There's other cattle buyers," Morgan said soberly. "I know two who would come up here sudden if we said the word!"

"Look, Morgan," Towers said bluntly. "I've traded with the Strip cattlemen for several years. I pay top prices, and I'm prepared to do it now!"

"Then that takes a load of worry off the minds of the new association," Curt Caldwell interrupted. "You know, things even up in the long run," he added musingly. "Those cars were ordered first for the Rafter R and the Triangle C, but of course you've got to protect yourself, Towers. You needed cattle, so you made a deal with Sam Clanton."

"You made another deal with the Double B, Towers," Brad Blaine added his bit. "We'll deliver at least three hundred head at the rails over in Saint George, at thirty dollars a round as agreed. I'm shore it makes no difference who you pay the money to."

Crail Towers looked up from his plate. He had been eating hungrily, but he now seemed to have suddenly lost his appetite.

"Meaning anything special, yearling?" he asked young Blaine.

Brad Blaine was on his feet with anger twisting his face. "Yearling, is it?" he shouted. "I'm old enough to see through this double game you've been dealing. You contract with the Double B to buy our steers, and then you tell the S Bar C they can have the cars. Looks to me like you did the same thing with the Triangle C and the Rafter R, and we aim to keep you honest!"

"Lay yore hackles, Brad," Morgan said soothingly. "You stated the case accurately, and all hands are right back where they started from, including Towers. The only one who loses, as I see it, is Twins McFee!"

Crail Towers stared levelly at Morgan. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

"That's a good one," he roared. "Twins McFee is an outlaw, so what's he got to lose?"

"His life, perhaps," Morgan answered grimly. "I happened to be under his gun when he made a deal with the Masked Rider for a showdown!"

Towers shrugged. "They're both outlaws," he answered carelessly. "Personally, I think this Masked Rider is overrated. He comes and goes like a shadow, and no one ever sees him stand up for a real showdown!"

"I saw him!" Brad Blaine interrupted hotly. "Colt Prosper was waiting to bush me from the brush, but the Masked Rider shot so quick you couldn't see his hand move!"

Towers got up and walked toward his horse. Coosa Evans coughed and jerked his head toward the discarded plate and cup.

"Stow that gear in the wreck pan, mister!" the old cook ordered imperiously.

Towers gathered up the dirty dishes and dumped them in the wash pan under the tail-gate of the chuckwagon. Then he

mounted his horse and faced around.

"I'll take delivery of those steers if you deliver them in good shape at Purgatory," he told Ranson. "Now I've got to be riding out and find the S Bar C crew. I'll see you at the yards in Purgatory!"

Ranson nodded, and turned to Brad Blaine. He waited until Towers was out of the sound of his voice, and the Double B man glanced at Morgan.

"You talked a lot with your mouth wide open, Blaine," Ranson began. Then he grinned at the youngster. "You stated what we were all thinking, and you've helped us considerable."

BRAD BLAINE stared, and then swallowed noisily. "You'd do the same for me, Rob," he answered gruffly.

"And now is the time to do it," Ranson said heartily. "Morgan can boss the round-up here, and I'll ride with you to see old Mormon. With yore three men to help, you ought to gather a couple hundred more steers to load on those cars."

Morgan shook his head doubtfully, but Ranson had given the orders. He rode off with Brad Blaine and the three bearded Mormons, and Morgan turned to Curt Caldwell who was picking a crew to make the drive to Purgatory.

"How many men you taking, Curt?" he asked the old cattleman.

"I'll take six men to start, and that will leave you ten," Caldwell answered confidently. "I can pick up a few more men as we drive down the valley, and those buttons yonder can hold what you gather in that blind draw."

The entire crew worked for an hour to get the trail-drive strung out and started toward the rails. Then Morgan and his men rode out in the brushy draws to collect the strays for another herd. When Morgan rode in for dinner, Coosa Evans sidled up to him and spoke guardedly behind his hand.

"I'm on-easy, Morgan. The boss and that Blaine hairpin riding off together, and neither one of them as fast as they think they are!"

"I was giving it some thought," Morgan admitted. "But a man can't very well be in two places at the same time!"

"These boys know just what to do here," the old cook pleaded. "I wish you'd gear a fresh horse and take you a little ride, Morgan. Like as not I'm just getting myself in a lather about nothing, but you could keep out of sight. Then again, if the boss got in a tight, he'd need some of yore kind of help mighty bad!"

"You've talked me into it, Coosa," Morgan said gravely, and then he held out his hand and gripped the old cook hard. "I had the same feeling," he admitted honestly. "I'll be back before dark!"

Now that his course had been decided, Morgan acted speedily. He roped out a fresh horse, a strapping roan with long legs. He changed his riding gear and slammed out of camp in a dead run, and Coosa Evans sighed and put the shotgun close to his hand.

Morgan held to a fast pace for more than an hour. He was still in the badlands when he climbed a steep trail to a little mesa and reined in to let the horse blow. He cupped his old field glasses to his eyes, and then he stopped the sweeping movement and focused the lens. A hissing breath escaped from his lips when he saw Rob Ranson and Brad Blaine facing a third man down in a grassy park among the volcanic rubble.

Morgan judged the distance to be more than a half mile; perhaps three times as far by the winding trails. The man on the ground who blocked the trail was Twins McFee, and he held a six-shooter in each hand.

Blaine and Ranson sat their saddles with the bridle-reins in their left hands. Their right hands were on the saddle-horns, and then Twins McFee suddenly holstered his guns.

Morgan sat like a man carved from saddle rock. He wanted to race down and take up the fight, but he knew there was nothing he could do. So he sat and watched with the glasses frozen to his staring eyes. He knew what was happening just as plainly as if he had heard the outlaw speak. Twins McFee was offering Ranson and Blaine a show-down chance, and Morgan knew they both would accept.

Suddenly Brad Blaine ripped his right hand up and struck down for his holstered gun. Rob Ranson was only a second later, but Twins McFee dipped down with both hands in a smooth co-ordination of muscle and mind.

MORGAN saw the wink of burning powder as twin flames lanced out from the outlaw's guns. Brad Blaine was battered backward over his cattle, while Rob Ranson pitched to the left side.

Morgan reached for his rifle and raised the sights for eight hundred yards. He trig-

gered a shot away, and levered a second shell into the breech. Then he fired again and moved the gun slightly with each shot to drop screaming lead all around the handsome outlaw down in the trail.

Twins McFee made a dive for the brush, and a moment later, Morgan saw him riding his spurs toward the hideout at the base of the Vermillion Cliffs. With his hot rifle back in the boot, Morgan turned his horse and rode at top speed down the steep trail.

His horse was breathing hard when Morgan slid to a stop in the little grassy park. Rob Ranson was sitting up with his right hand pressed to his shoulder. Brad Blaine was face-down in the trail, and Morgan ran to the young Mormon and felt for a heart-beat.

"He's alive, Ranson!" he cried. Rob Ranson smiled and toppled over in a faint from bullet shock.

Morgan stood up and stared at the towering mass of red rocks in the distance. His lips moved swiftly.

"I'll get that killing son!" he swore solemnly."

He glanced down quickly at Ranson, but the Rafter R boss was unconscious. Morgan examined the wound; a clean hole through the left shoulder. Painful, and Ranson had lost a lot of blood, but the wound was not serious.

Morgan made a plug and a crude bandage. Then he went to Brad Blaine and turned the young Mormon over. He shook his head slowly when he saw the wound just inches above the heart.

"He'll live with care, but it was mighty close," Morgan murmured.

"I'm glad to hear it," a voice said weakly, and Morgan turned to find Rob Ranson sitting up. "That lobo took us both on at the same time, and he beat us both on the draw. We weren't fast enough!"

Morgan did what he could for young Blaine, and then he turned again to Ranson. The Rafter R boss was stronger now, and he nodded when Morgan suggested a plan.

"I've got to get to the Double B for help, Ranson. They will have to come as far as they can with a wagon, and carry him from here to the wagon on a stretcher. You'll be all right until I get back?"

"Right as rain," Ranson answered gamely. "And if McFee or any other outlaw comes prowling through here, I'll shoot first and tell it scarey after the smoke clears away!"

CHAPTER XIV

Powder Smoke Promise

INTENTLY Marian Caldwell watched Wayne Morgan who was cleaning his six-shooters by a window in the big room of the Rafter R house. Rob Ranson was lying on a low couch, with pillows propped behind his back. The girl studied Morgan's grim face for a long moment.

"It's three days since you brought Rob back," she said softly. "The doctor says he will be up in another week, and Brad Blaine is out of danger. Must you go today?"

Morgan glanced at Ranson. He nodded without looking at the pretty girl.

"That's right," he answered. "We've delivered most of the cattle to Purgatory, and Mormon Blaine has done the same over at Saint George. We're starting another roundup today!"

"I know," Marian said with a sigh. "You are going to surround Outlaw Valley."

Curt Caldwell rode into the big yard at the head of his Triangle C crew. All were well mounted and heavily armed; a grim fighting force who now had something to fight for. Caldwell came into the room and announced some surprising news.

"I did what Morgan suggested, Rob. A cattle buyer got here last night. We sold all our steers for thirty-five dollars a round!"

"Which same Crail Towers won't like," Morgan said quietly.

He stood up and holstered his weapons, and a change came over him. He walked stiff-legged with short steps as he crossed the room and shook hands with the wounded man.

"I'm wishing you and Marian all the good luck in the world," he said to Ranson. "Sorry I can't stay for the wedding!"

"I won't act surprised, because I knew you read the sign," Ranson answered with a smile. "But there's a job here for you as foreman of the Rafter R if you will stay!"

Morgan shook his head. "Sand in my boots, Rob," he said with a smile. "I get the itching heel, and if we have luck today, you won't be needing any of my kind of help to keep the Strip clean. You ready, Curt?"

Marian Caldwell stopped Morgan and took his two hands. "Won't you stay for

the wedding?" she asked wistfully. "You kept your promise to me, and you also saved Rob for me!"

"I'm not gone yet," Morgan said laughingly. "I'll be seeing you before I roll my bed!"

He released his hands and hurried out to his horse. The Triangle C crew greeted him eagerly, and the Rafter R men were sitting their horses near the tie-rail. Some of the smaller cattle outfits had sent reps to help with the manhunt, and Morgan counted sixteen men, not including himself and Curt Caldwell.

Morgan mounted and told the fighting crew to follow him to the S Bar C. Even Curt Caldwell expressed surprise, but Morgan was racing out of the yard to lead the way. Across the desert range at a gallop, and when they came to the forks of the trail, Morgan turned in toward the S Bar C and then stopped. He waited until the cowboys had gathered around.

"The secret to this whole scheme is down at the S Bar C," he explained quietly. "Two men plotted to steal most of the cattle from yore Strip outfits, and they planned to get most of the land as well. One of these men is Twins McFee. The other man, whoever he is, will be the new owner of the S Bar C!"

"Those two cousins of Clanton's, from down Texas way," Curt Caldwell muttered.

"They are not Clanton's cousins, and they've already turned the S Bar C over to the new owner," Morgan explained. "Not only that. You've got an association here now, and you can settle all claims between yoreselves. You will find about fifteen hundred head of yearlings and weaner calves way back there on the S Bar C. That's where yore calves went, the ones Twins McFee and his gang sleepered before they could be branded. Now let's ride, and whoever this new owner is, we'll take him for the law!"

GRIMY HANDS loosened six-shooters in holsters as the Association men swept into the big S Bar C yard. Joe Purdue and Clay Sims came out on the porch, but the rest of the crew were not in sight. Purdue kept his hands away from his gunbelts as he shouted a cheery greeting.

"Glad you men rode over. The rest of the boys are out working, but I want you to meet the new owner of the S Bar C!"

He turned toward the big front door, and a tall man came out, chewing on an unlighted cigar.

"Crail Towers bought the S Bar C just yesterday!" Purdue made his announcement.

Curt Caldwell opened his mouth and stared in stunned surprise. Wayne Morgan flipped out a gun with his right hand, and covered the cattle buyer.

"Don't move, Towers!" he said grimly. "I suspected you the night Twins McFee made his raids on the Rafter R and Double B shipping herds. Someone warned him, and then I heard McFee tip his hand about taking over the S Bar C. You and he intended to clean up on all those rustled cattle, and then go straight. McFee would go to South America and live in comfort the rest of his life. Take a couple of men and deliver this rustler to the law in Purgatory, Curt!"

Curt Caldwell gasped and then closed his lips tight. A Triangle C cowboy dismounted and took the weapons from Towers, Purdue and Sims. Caldwell covered the trio, and Morgan turned his horse and waved his arm for the rest of the crew to follow him.

Morgan explained his plan as they rode at a canter across the badlands range. He divided the men in two groups, and told half of them to ride over and guard the trail leading into Outlaw Valley. These men were under the direction of tall Sam Johnson of the Rafter R, and Morgan told the rest of the crew to follow him.

The crew stared at the Vermillion Cliffs when Morgan stopped and held up his hand. They watched in amazement when Morgan parted the thick brush screen and rode through, and when they followed in single file, Morgan led them into the big dry cave.

"I found this one day," he explained. "Tie up the horses, and follow me. This cave runs way back, and comes out on a little shelf looking right down into Outlaw Valley. Don't show yoreselves or make a sound, and don't worry about me. I'll be riding between here and the rest of the crew."

Then he led the way through the velvety blackness of the deep winding cave. After the long climb up the steep trail, Morgan stepped out on the broad shelf which was screened with heavy brush.

"Line yore rifles on any man you see down in the valley!" he ordered grimly. "You take charge here, Curt. If they don't

surrender, remember you men are fighting for yore ranches in the Strip!"

Curt Caldwell took a long look down into Outlaw Valley. Several men were lolling at the tie-rail in front of the log-and-sod house. Several more were on guard in the pass leading to the outer badlands. Caldwell focused a pair of powerful field glasses and swore softly.

"You've done good work here, Morgan!" he praised quietly. "I recognize three of those outlaws down yonder. They were on the S Bar C payroll, and Crail Towers would have ruined us if you hadn't spoiled his plans. With Towers on the S Bar C, he could have shipped all the cattle they've rustled from us for the last two years. He would have taken over several of the smaller outfits, and Ranson and I wouldn't have had a chance!"

"You can thank the Masked Rider for most of it," Morgan answered quietly. "The rest is up to you now. Give that bunch of killers a chance to surrender, and most of them won't!" he added pointedly. "I'll ride down there now to see how the other crew is making out!"

MORGAN smiled in the darkness as he made his way swiftly through the winding cave. He mounted his Rafter R horse, rode out of the cave, and kept to the shelter of the lava rocks as he rode swiftly toward the west. He rode into a grassy pocket when a burrow owl hooted three times, and then Morgan made a swift transformation.

Blue Hawk was waiting with Midnight, and the big black stallion muzzled his master joyfully. Morgan took the long black cap the Yaqui handed to him. He slipped it over his shoulders, adjusted the black domino mask, and tugged the expensive black Stetson down over his curly brown hair.

Blue Hawk gripped the Masked Rider's hand and spoke confidently. "I will meet you tonight on the little mesa, Senor. *Bueno Fortuna!*"

"I might need the good luck," the Masked Rider murmured in a low voice. "You will find Midnight here, if I am lucky, and I will change to the Rafter R horse. If all goes well, we leave the Strip tonight. *Hasta la vista, amigo!*"

"Until we meet again," the Indian repeated, and the Masked Rider swung up to the saddle on the black stallion.

The rarefied air seemed charged with an electrical tension as the Masked Rider raced swiftly toward the west. Rifle fire shattered the stillness just as he reached the slash in the high west wall of the cliff-sheltered valley. The Masked Rider rode into the brush and dismounted, leaving the bridle-reins looped around the saddle-horn.

Midnight would stay hidden, or would answer his master's call if the Masked Rider needed him. No other man except Blue Hawk could get close to the stallion, and the Masked Rider started to climb the steep shale strewn cut where the landslide had blocked the trail.

He had made a promise while under the very guns of death, and the Masked Rider smiled with his lips. He paused halfway up the slide, loosened the guns in his black holsters, and flexed the fingers of his right hand, to limber it up.

The Masked Rider took a deep breath and continued the steep ascent. He could hear the furious bark of rifles, and the heavier roar of six-shooters. When he reached the top of the slide, he stiffened instinctively as he glanced up at the rock where Manuel Pasqual had hidden.

The rock was empty, and there was no other place where an enemy could have secreted himself. The Masked Rider cupped the old glasses to his eyes and scanned the battle down in the valley. Two men were down inside the rocky pass which guarded the eastern trail to Purgatory. Three more men were out of the fight, sprawled near the tie-rail in front of the little house built into the cliff.

The Masked Rider could see the spurt of flames from the rifles on the shelf which led out from the hidden cave. Then the shooting stopped, and four men walked out from behind lava rocks with their hands high in the air. One of the men was the wounded Mexican, but something else was taking place in the valley which the riflemen on the shelf could not see.

A tall wide-shouldered man was creeping along the wall toward a post where a big gray stallion was tied. A big man with twin guns tied low on his powerful legs, and a cold killing rage in his merciless heart.

Twins McFee was going to keep an appointment which meant more to him than life!

The Masked Rider watched McFee creep along the cliff He saw the outlaw leap to the saddle and spur the gray stallion into a mad burst of speed. A fusillade

of shots greeted his getaway, and then Twins McFee was out of range and riding to keep his powdersmoke promise.

STRAIGHT across the valley in a dead run, the fastest gunman in the Arizona Strip raced to his reward. For the privilege of matching gun-magic with a master.

The Masked Rider stepped into the clear and spread his boots for balance. Twins McFee reached the steep trail leading up from the valley floor, and the stallion raced up under the momentum of his blinding speed.

One lunging leap, and the stallion was on the mesa rim. Twins McFee stepped down easily, took two running steps, and pivoted in a graceful turn to face the man who had ruined all his carefully laid plans.

The Masked Rider waited in silence, waited for the outlaw to recover from the reaction of the hard fast run. With his elbows he spread the black cape back and away from the black-butted six-shooters on his long sinewy legs. He smiled when he saw the menacing outlaw ten paces away.

Twins McFee was leaning forward in a crouch. No fear showed on his handsome face, or in the depths of his narrowed gray eyes.

He felt no regret for a kingdom almost within his grasp, and which he had lost when victory seemer certain.

"It does not matter," McFee stated calmly. "I said I'd give it all to match six-shooters with the Masked Rider. You kept yore promise; I kept mine!"

The Masked Rider nodded. All the talking had been done, and one of them had used up almost all his time. He could feel a deep pulsing beat in his right hand, and then he nodded again.

He had not spoken, but both knew that the nod was the go-ahead.

Twins McFee plunged both hands down in a blinding burst of incredible speed. The Masked Rider concentrated all his powers of mind and muscle in the speed of his right hand. That hand dipped down and up like the flash of light from a mirror, and pale flame belched from the leaping muzzle of his gun like an answering flash.

Twins McFee cleared leather with both six-shooters. Twin blasts of powdersmoke tipped the muzzles of his killer guns, but those muzzles had not tipped up. Twin puffs of dust spiraled up on each side of the Masked Rider's boots, and his smoking gun was back in leather before McFee had pitched to the ground with a bullet through his cruel but courageous heart.

The Masked Rider turned and stepped back into the brush which choked the blocked trail. Then he was racing through the underbrush on Midnight, and five minutes later he rode out of the tangles on the Rafter R horse. The Masked Rider had kept his promise, but Wayne Morgan would have to help with the prisoners. A cowboy rode out to meet him as he came through the pass to Outlaw Valley.

"We got them all, Morgan," the Rafter R cowboy shouted. "And we saw the Masked Rider beat Twins McFee to the draw!"

"I heard the shooting, and I saw the Masked Rider ride away," Morgan said quietly. "I reckon McFee is dead, and now there will be peace in Purgatory Valley. Let's get these prisoners back to town. McFee was the last of the band!"

WHEN DEADLY PERIL STALKS THE DIAMOND CROSS, WAYNE MORGAN AND BLUE HAWK EMBARK ON ONE OF THEIR MOST DIFFICULT CAMPAIGNS FOR JUSTICE IN

MAD MOON OF MOONSTONE

By HASCAL GILES

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING COMPLETE MASKED RIDER NOVEL

You Can't Stay On Top

By JOHN C. ROPKE

Eddie Brady, the cowboy from Canada who claims he can show Montana riders a trick or two, comes along to challenge the championship honors of modest bronc-stomping Ray Lucas!

CHAPTER I

Day Money

RAY LUCAS walked slowly down the double line of tethered horses, feeling the heat of the huge tent. Swarms of insects buzzed around the dimly lighted kerosene lamps, and only a few of the sleeping horses bothered to raise their heads as he passed.

A big, wide shouldered ranny in his late twenties, he walked with a slight limp. Reaching the boarded corral at the far end of the enclosure, he studied the milling broncs through the bars. There were no sleeping horses here. All were awake, alert, bunched at the far end of the corral, snorting and stamping their nervousness.

Ray's mild blue eyes searched for, and found, the big speckled gray he was to ride the following afternoon. With professional carefulness, Ray watched the actions of the gray. Mentally, he noted the muscular action of the animal, and for a long time he studied the horses' eyes, trying to figure something of what went on behind their bright intelligence.

There was little about the good-looking man standing there alone beside the pen, dressed in expensive well-tailored clothes, to indicate that just a few short years be-

fore he had been a bronc stomper on a Montana ranch.

A steady, even snore caught Ray's attention and he turned to locate the sound. It came from a corner of the tent where a seedy looking cowboy slept on a bale of hay. Ray chuckled and walked over to stand beside the sleeping figure, remembering that not so long ago he hadn't had the price of a cheap hotel room.

The young man on the hay opened one eye sleepily, then came instantly awake, a wide grin creasing his wire-thin lips.

"Hi," he said, as he sat up quickly. "Got a cigarette?"

Ray handed the kid a half pack and smiled in amusement as the boy helped himself to one and put the rest of the pack in his shirt pocket. Lighting the cigarette, the boy inhaled deeply, like one who hadn't had a smoke in days. Then slowly he exhaled, sighing in satisfaction.

"Name's Eddie Brady," he said then. "Just got in from Canada this morning. I figure on showing these Montana cowboys a few tricks in riding the buckers."

Ray sat down beside the rider. Ordinarily he'd have given the kid a few bucks for a meal and a room and would have left rather than listen to some punk kid tell how good he was. But there was something about the tone of Eddie Brady's voice that interested him. The poorly dressed cowboy beside him wasn't boasting, he was merely stating a fact. One and three were four, Eddie was saying.

"Bet you'll show them, too, amigo," Ray said.

For ten seconds Ray Lucas showed the form which had given him the title of Champion Saddle Bronc Rider

EDDIE leaned back on the bale and rested on his elbows. "I sure will! Starting tomorrow I'm goin' to give these judges some real riding for a change. They probably ain't never seen a good Canadian rider before."

That was big talk coming from an empty stomach, Ray thought. The kid looked as though he had been riding the rods, and Ray was willing to bet the rider had put up his last cent for the entry fee.

Ray stood up and looked around the tent at the stock. Without looking at Eddie, he said casually, "Reckon I'll go up the block and have some java and pie. Sure like to have you join me, Brady. I never did like eating alone."

The lad stood up beside Ray. "Thanks," he said softly, "but Brady never took a hand-out in his life. Now, if you'll lend me five bucks, that's different. Then the feed's on me. And I'll pay you back tomorrow, as soon as I collect day money."

Ray had to smile at the rider's confidence. There would be twelve riders the following afternoon, some of them pretty good men, and Eddie was already sure he would win day money.

Ray pulled a five-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to the boy. As they strode toward the entrance of the tent Eddie said:

"Thanks for the cigarettes and the five, fella. Now if you'll tell me your name and where I can find you tomorrow night, I'll be paying you back, sure as you're born."

"Ray Lucas is my brand, amigo. I'm stopping at the Blackstone Hotel. But you'll be seeing me around. I'm in the show, too."

Eddie digested this in silence for a few seconds, then he stopped short and turned. "You the same Ray Lucas as won the champion rider award in New York last fall?"

Ray nodded. "That's right, friend. I was pretty lucky too . . .

Eddie reached in his pants pocket and handed back the five dollar bill. "Shucks," he said in disgust, "I can't take this from you, fella. Ain't I the guy that's going to take the championship from you next fall?"

* * * * *

Dawn was putting out the saloon lights of the town of Broken Wheel and filtering into the big stock tent when "Pop" Gaynor woke Eddie Brady. He studied the boy with an amused smile for long seconds, then pushed him awake.

"All right, son," he said softly, "you'll have to be getting up now or I'll be getting into trouble for letting you sleep here. It's against the rules, you know."

Eddie was instantly awake, his easy grin appearing even before he opened his eyes. He sat up on the hay, yawning and smiling at the same time. Wisps of hay stuck to one side of his face and porcupined his dark brown hair.

"Well," he said, "today's the day, Pop. Today's the day little Eddie Brady starts his career."

Pop Gaynor smiled. "I wish you all the best in the world, son. I know you'll—"

Eddie laughed as he stood up abruptly. "Nix, Pop. You don't have to wish me luck. It's in the bag. I can't lose, Pop, believe me."

The slim rider brushed the straw out of his hair and dry washed his face. He was dusting his clothes when he spoke again.

"Thanks for letting me sleep here, Pop. Now if you'll lend me the price of a breakfast, I'll pay you back tonight. After I collect day money for my ride this afternoon."

The elderly stock tender chuckled as he reached into his jeans. "What makes you so sure," he said softly as he handed the boy a neatly folded dollar. "How do you know you'll win day money, son? It's a small show, sure, most early Spring shows usually are. But there's some pretty fair riders you'll be bucking."

Eddie was smiling now as he realized the old man was amused. "Look, Pop," he said seriously, "I've never been in a rodeo before. I've spent my whole life on a horse ranch in the Canadian backwoods."

The young rider paused and located the crumpled half pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket. He fingered one as he continued. "My dad's the best horse trainer in Canada, Pop, and he says I'm the best rider he ever saw. So I don't guess there's any question about it. If Dad says it—then it's gospel truth."

RAY LUCAS, on the speckled gray, was the fourth rider that afternoon. The gate of Chute Number Three swung open and the gray was raising hell as he came out. Sun-fishing his way across the arena, the animal put so much enthusiasm into his exercise he almost lost his footing a couple of times.

Ray rode with an easy rhythmical grace that brought the stands to their feet with roars of approval. Arms swaying, legs

swinging in the roweling motion of the professional, Ray was in the saddle to stay.

The crowd sensed that in the first few seconds, and those who hadn't seen him before knew now why he had taken the championship at the Garden the fall before. There was no doubt of it, their expressions said here was a master horseman.

When the ten-second horn sounded, Ray was still riding easily. Attendants lifted him from the saddle of the still bucking horse and lowered him to the ground. Limping slightly, he dog-trotted toward the exit, smiling and waving his pearl gray Stetson as he went.

There were other riders after that, but they were only poor imitations of Ray's exhibition. There was no question of who the top rider of the show was—that is until Eddie Brady, the twelfth and last rider, came out of Chute Number One on Chopsticks.

Even the other contestants of the show watched with interest as the gate swung open. Eddie had been telling all who would listen how good he was, and now the men watched with cynical smiles.

The stands had hushed suddenly, sensing the unusual. Many of the spectators had noted Eddie's cocky walk, the confident way he climbed the chute and dropped into the saddle of the nervous bucker with almost casual indifference.

There was deep silence as Chopsticks came into the ring, for all knew that the rangy chestnut was plenty of horse. He had a peculiar side-winding buck that was ungainly, and if that didn't work, which it usually did, he had a bag of tricks to open.

But the young Canadian horseman wasn't a defensive rider. He didn't wait for a horse to use his tricks. Eddie forced the issue. Chopsticks started to side wind and Eddie began to rowel hard, a jerky motion that carried more authority in it than style.

He used the hackamore rope too. Yanked it viciously to get the horse's head up. Eddie fought the power beneath him with every ounce of strength in his wiry body. He did more than just ride, he worked, and worked hard.

Confused, the chestnut forgot his side-winding and began sun-fishing. Still the rider's muscular legs drove the spurs to him, the strain on the hackamore line pulling his head slightly to one side.

Chopsticks went beserk then. Forgetting his ring wisdom, he began to buck like a crazy colt. It was then that Eddie smiled. He still kept working, fighting the animal's every jump, but he had relaxed, knowing he had won.

The stands came to their feet as the ten-second horn sounded. Eddie's smile widened and he lifted one leg over the pommel and left the saddle. He hit the ground running, narrowly escaping a flying chestnut hoof, and ran across the arena.

There had been something cocky about the way he left the bucking saddle, not waiting for the attendants, and the crowds ate it up. Their thunderous applause now became an ovation. Even one of the judges grinned and shook his head in admiration of the boy's recklessness.

Standing at the side of the exit gate, Ray Lucas frowned and turned away. He knew there was no reason to hang around now. Eddie Brady had taken day money.

One of the rules of the show was that a winning rider must be present to receive his prize or forfeit the money to the next best rider. But Ray Lucas knew he wasn't risking anything by going back to his hotel. He had known even before the final approval of the crowd that Eddie would make "best ride."

The boy could ride, there was no doubt of that. Further, he had that something that few men had—color. Eddie was different. Besides being a good rider, he had that extra something that made you notice him.

Ray had recognized it before the ride was half over. But the stands knew it now, and so did the judges. Eddie Brady of Canada was on his way up, and one of the few on top would have to step down to make room for him.

Ray paused on the sidewalk of the town's street and looked up at the blue Montana sky.

"One more year," he said half aloud. "Just one more year."

CHAPTER II
Bragging Rider

THE dining room of the Hotel Blackstone was crowded. The best hotel in town, it boasted three stories and twenty-seven rooms, five with bath. Ray Lucas

sat with three other contestants of the show when "Biff" Thompson, a bull-dogger, looked up from his plate and stared at the entrance to the grill room.

"Holy mackerel!" he groaned. "Get a load of that."

Ray and the other men looked up curiously, and one almost choked on his mouthful of food.

Eddie Brady stood in the square doorway looking over the room. But it was a different Brady than the one who rode Chopsticks earlier in the day.

The new Brady wore a Kelly green shirt with plenty of white piping. Dark gray rip cord riding pants, with a wide white stripe, were tucked neatly into polished boots, a bucking horse embossed on the front of each boot. And his wide-brimmed white sombrero dazzled the room.

Eddie spotted Ray's table and made his way through the crowded room, a wide grin on his face. People turned as he passed, and he nodded as though to friends and tipped his hat. Still wearing that happy-go-lucky grin, he pulled a chair up to Ray's table.

"Hi," he said. "How do you fellers like the new outfit?" Without waiting for an answer he signalled the waiter with a casual wave of his hand. He gave his order and turned his attention back to the table.

"You like the outfit, hey? I thought you would. But you ain't seen nothing yet! Wait till you see what I get when I win the first prize the show is giving." He helped himself to a half glass of someone's beer.

Ray Lucas was conscious of the cold fish eyes the rest of the table were giving this newcomer. He said, "That was a nice ride this afternoon, Brady. That chestnut is a tough baby to make any kind of a showing on."

Eddie put his hat carefully on an empty seat at the next table. "Hell," he grinned, "that was nothing, Ray. I told you last night I'd take day money. Just watch me when I draw a real horse. Then I'll show you some riding."

Biff Thompson pushed his half empty plate away with a frown. "You talk a lot, don't you, friend?"

Eddie grinned. "Yep. Always did. Talk too blamed much, my father always used to say. But I can usually do what I say I'm goin' to do. That's what makes people mad, Biff."

Biff studied the young Canadian rider for several seconds, then rose slowly. "You're a good rider, kid. Maybe a great one. I wouldn't know. But you keep shooting off your mouth too much and somebody's gonna push a couple of teeth down your throat."

Eddie was still smiling, but the mirth had left his eyes. He eyed the heavy shouldered bull-dogger steadily.

"Meaning you, Biff?"

The big man nodded. "Maybe," he said.

Eddie grinned. "That's been tried before, fella. And I'll bet you ten to five you're not big enough to do it."

Biff stiffened and Ray noticed heads turning in their direction. He put his hand gently on the big man's arm.

"Easy, Thompson," he drawled. "The kid's entitled to blow off some steam. Give him a break."

Tension left the man and he visibly relaxed. Without another word he pushed back his chair and started to leave the table. As he started away, Eddie said:

"I'll take care of the check, Biff. I hear you ain't taken a top prize in some time. This one is on little Eddie."

Biff kept moving away, but those at the table could see how red the back of his neck had become. Within five minutes the other riders had left, leaving only Ray Lucas with the rider who threatened his throne.

Ray finished his pie and leaned back comfortably. Smoking a cigarette, he smiled at the young rider across from him, busily munching a steak the size of his plate.

"Take it easy with Thompson, Eddie," he said lazily. "He's a good apple, but he's mighty tough to go pushing around. He's had a lot of hard luck lately."

EDDIE looked up from his plate with a grin. "It ain't hard luck, Ray. I watched him today. He just hasn't got it any more. He's slow, his timing is off. Someone ought to tell him he's all washed up before he hurts himself."

Ray fingered his cigarette. "Maybe you're right," he admitted. "Biff isn't a kid any more. But making an enemy of him isn't going to help him—or you either."

Eddie shrugged. "Not the way I look at it, fella. Biff still thinks he's hot stuff. Maybe if a kid like me beats his head in, he'll realize he's not the man he used to be."

Ray was silent for long minutes then he

chuckled. "Suppose he beats the devil out of you, Eddie? What then?"

The slim young rider grinned. "Not a chance, Ray. Believe me, he hasn't a chance."

There it was again, Ray thought, that braggadocio that was spoken as a simple fact. Here was a young novice, thirty pounds lighter than husky Biff Thompson, and yet the boy spoke of beating his head in. And surprisingly, Ray had the feeling the boy could make good.

There was something inevitable about this kid. Ray had noticed it that first night in the big tent. He was that rare specimen —a braggart who could do exactly as he boasted he could. A perfect example of egotism, one whose sublime self confidence kept him from failing.

"Take it easy with him, Eddie," Ray said softly. "I like Thompson."

Eddie nodded. "So do I," he said. "But that's no reason to pamper him. He's a has-been. It's time he stepped down to make room for those coming up."

Eddie didn't win day money the next day. Ray Lucas took it, and it wasn't even close. The judges knew that, but if the crowd had its way the little Canadian rider would have been awarded the prize. For Eddie, even in defeat, had the unmistakable touch of color that marked the outstanding performer.

Eddie had drawn Dumbbell, a "first ride" horse. He was an unknown quantity, yet the spectators in the stands knew he was a dud before he was out of the chute two seconds. He bucked half-heartedly, straight away, with no attempt to fight the rider on his back.

The crowd groaned, then rose to their feet with a roar as Eddie did the unexpected. Dropping the hackamore rope, Eddie raised his hands above his head to show his complete disapproval.

Even then he managed to hold his seat. Then to prove his utter disgust, he kicked free of the stirrups, put his hands on the pommel, and climbed erect on the saddle. For only a moment or two he rode like that, standing upright on the hurricane deck, then lost balance and jumped to the ground.

He sprawled as he landed, and rose quickly with a wide grin to doff his hat gallantly to the crowd. For a hesitant second there was silence, then pandemonium broke loose. Laughter and applause mingled to form thunder that clapped down from the stands.

Grinning, Eddie trotted for the exit gate.

But Eddie won the next day, and the following day. There was only mild applause when Ray Lucas was announced now, the big roar was saved for the new star to arrive on the horizon. Eddie had captured the crowd's imagination. He was in!

And Eddie knew it. He was good; very good indeed, and didn't hesitate to tell everyone he met how good he was. Contestants began avoiding him, then snubbing him as he became more obnoxious in his egotism.

Even Pop Gaynor, who liked the boy, spoke to him about his bragging.

"Son," he said the night before the last show, "why don't you take her a little easy on this big talk of yours. You're only making enemies, boy. You could be making a lot of friends."

WITH a grin, Eddie ground his cigarette under the heel of his new fancy boots. "Shucks, Pop," he said easily. "They're just jealous. I'm good, and I'm not afraid to say so."

He stopped grinning suddenly and leaned forward. "You know, Pop, it takes nerve to brag. I never had much faith in these modest fellers. They're afraid of themselves. Afraid they can't keep winning. They haven't the sand to brag because they're afraid they can't live up to what they've done before."

Eddie was grinning again. "I'm not afraid, Pop. See the difference?"

Pop smoked his pipe in silence. There was a lot, he thought, to what this boy said.

There were several contestants, however, who didn't appreciate Eddie's way of thinking. They admired his style of riding, respected him for his savvy and ability with the broncs, but personally they couldn't take him.

They watched him put on a show with a hammer-headed roan the last day of the contest and knew, even before Ray Lucas rode his mount, that Eddie's ride wouldn't be bettered.

A few groaned, knowing the kid would be harder to ignore then ever. If they shunned him, now, there were people, other than the kid himself, who would think they were jealous.

Something, they decided, would have to be done. And Biff Thompson, the fading bull-dogger star was elected to do it. Biff

would start an argument with the kid, beat his brains in, and that would be enough. Eddie would be easier to live with after that, they unanimously decided.

Only Ray Lucas thought different. He tried to talk them out of it. He told them that either way it wouldn't make a difference. Win or lose, the kid wouldn't change.

Biff Thompson rubbed his big knuckles with a grin and clenched his ham-like fists. "Shucks, Ray," he said. "When I get finished with him he'll change alright! You'll see."

Eddie, in his Kelly green shirt, was down by the corral when Biff saw him. Biff knew from the conversation as he approached that the kid was trying to buy Gill O'Brien's horse and outfit. Gill was an old-timer who had once been on top, but hadn't hit the prize money for some time.

Gill was arguing as Biff approached, and Biff figured the kid was offering half of what the outfit was really worth. He reached forward eagerly, grabbed the kid's shirt by the padded shoulder and swung him around.

"Why don't you give him a break?" Biff snarled. "You know he needs the money."

"Why don't you mind your own business, chum?" Eddie said casually. "That is, if you've got any business."

Biff smiled, and swung, his hand describing a wide, thick arc.

Eddie didn't try to duck. He threw himself forward, the top of his head catching Biff's chin with brutal force. Biff staggered back and went down, and Eddie stood watching him, shaking the haze from his brain.

Biff came to his knees, pain clouding his eyes, and Eddie said, "Stay there, Biff. Call it quits, fella, before you get hurt."

But Biff came groggily to his feet and bumbled forward, big hands outstretched. Eddie's foot came out and up, and bones snapped in Biff's right hand.

Instinctively the big man pulled the hand to his chest, grasping the injured member with his left hand and bending forward in pain.

Eddie stepped forward then, a frozen expression on his face. He hit Biff on the side of the head, just below the ear, and Biff caved at the knees. He went down heavily, slack jawed, and lay on the hoof-marked ground.

Eddie was aware of the crowd then. He studied the watching men with quick, alert eyes. Then he saw Ray Lucas.

"Tell Biff I'm sorry I had to do that," he said.

The softness left his eyes and he grinned at Gill O'Brien. "I'll see you later, Gill. We'll talk trade some more."

As he walked away, Gill yelled: "No need of comin' back—I ain't sellin' to you no time. My outfit ain't worth five hundred, not by a long shot. An' I ain't acceptin' no charity from a loud mouth son like you."

CHAPTER III
Grim Rivalry

A PRIZE stock show at Butte began the latter part of July. There were dozens of rodeos being run all over the west and southwest, but the only big time show was in Butte. It paid the highest money and drew the best riders of the spring and summer shows.

Ray Lucas was there, his limp more noticeable than ever. He had taken first prize in two shows in Texas in the previous month, but he knew that was because Eddie Brady had headed for New Mexico after that first show together. Now, coming out of the manager's office after paying his entry fee, he unconsciously took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

Eddie Brady was crossing the street. Dressed in the loud garb of an Eastern dude, Eddie strutted across the asphalt as though traffic didn't exist. A rattletrap sedan missed him by inches, but Eddie paid no attention. He had spotted Ray in the door of the manager's office and he came up the steps with his wide likeable grin.

"Hello, Eddie, boy," Ray said softly. "How have things been going in New Mexico?"

Eddie waved a casual hand in a meaningless gesture. "Aw, it was a waste of time, Ray. There was no competition down there. I cleaned out the place without half trying." He grinned. "You're the only rider who can give me competition, Ray. I'm sticking with you from now on. Beating you gives me more prestige."

Ray smiled. "You're pretty sure of

beating me, aren't you Eddie?"

Eddie shrugged and his grin disappeared. "I don't like to say this, Ray. You're a nice guy and I don't want to hurt your feelings. But you're washed up, chum. You're on the way down. Why don't you quit while you're still on top?"

Ray studied the young man before him. So the kid knows, he thought. He knows I'm just hanging on. But he doesn't know I've got to hang on. I've got to hit the big money before the leg goes completely.

Ray smiled suddenly, a flash of confidence coming back to the tired eyes. "You better ride like blazes this time, fella. I'm out to win."

But two days later as Eddie watched Ray Lucas mount the chute for his first ride of the show, he knew the man would have to ride like the devil himself to beat him.

Ray went up the side of the bronc chute too carefully. Even as Eddie watched, he saw Ray favor that left leg. Eddie's brow furrowed, then cleared as he shrugged and turned his eyes away.

Ray took a long while to come out of the chute, but when he did, he came out riding. A big blue roan came into the arena, seeming to head in a dozen different directions at once. His muscular body twisted and swerved, his angry screams hushed the roar of the crowd.

And for ten seconds Ray Lucas showed the form that had given him the title of Champion Saddle Bronc Rider. There was no grandstanding, no spectacular display in Ray's way of riding.

He rode with a professional skill that made the contortions of the giant blue seem casual. Legs swinging with deliberate regularity, body swaying with rhythmical grace, Ray sat glued to the hurricane deck.

The horn sounded suddenly and the stands came to its feet, roaring approval. Eddie joined in the general applause of the contestants, but his eyes had a surprised look. He knew that would be a ride to beat.

He grinned suddenly as his name came over the P. A. system. He thought, "Bah! At least I can tie him for day money."

He saw the black he was to ride through the bars of the chute as he approached. A big horse, topping eighteen hands, but bony. Eddie knew the horse would put on a show. The black had the look of a bucker, and Eddie knew horses.

HE WENT up the chute bars hand over hand, and dropped into the saddle with an abruptness that made the black paw the bars in front of him. He snorted his defiance, but the twitching muscles beneath Eddie's legs told the rider the horse was scared.

Eddie grinned at one of the handlers. "I hope you break your neck, big mouth," the handler said. "And this is the horse that can do it."

Eddie grinned as he nodded for the chute gate to be swung back. "Save your wind, sonny," he said to the handler. "This black ain't got a chance with Eddie riding."

The black went into the arena like a shot, snapping Eddie's head back and almost unseating him. And for the next four seconds Eddie fought to regain his balance.

He looked a little silly up there. A slim, mechanical toy being jerked by the muscular strings of the bucking black. He looked silly, but he kept his seat. And he rode. He fought to stay there in the saddle, keeping those slender legs going all the time.

Then suddenly he righted himself, and the crowd roared approval. To most of the stands it looked like the black was a sky-buster, a difficult bronc to ride, and they voiced their respect for Eddie's evident good horsemanship.

The watching contestants and the judges knew they were seeing a master at his trade. It had taken skill to regain balance in the hurricane seat of that type of bucker, and they all admired his courage for staying with it.

It was great grandstand stuff, and the crowd loved it. But it didn't cut any ice with the judges decision. Top points and day money went to Ray Lucas.

"A mighty fine ride," Eddie told Ray that evening as they sat together at dinner. "A beaut of a ride! It's unfortunate you can't keep it up."

Ray smiled softly. "What makes you think I can't repeat, kid?"

Eddie shrugged and avoided Ray's gaze. "Just a hunch," he said. "Just a hunch." He looked Ray full in the face then, and he grinned.

"Why don't you quit, Ray? You've done handy in the game. It can't be money. Now if I were—"

He stopped suddenly as he saw the look in Ray's eyes. Then he shrugged. "Well—it's your business. But I'm tell-

ing you—you stay in the rodeos and I'll ride your pants off."

And for the rest of the Butte show Eddie did just that. Ray rode his usual, steady ride, with professional finesse and casual indifference. But it wasn't enough.

Eddie rode as well, though in a different way. He fought the horses, urging his mount to its utmost. He had the color and flash of a new sensation on the way up. He had the color—and so he had the crowd.

Eddie took top money, with Ray a not-too-close second. The few folks who were at first surprised and sorry at Ray's decline, forgot their past idol in their enthusiasm at the new hard riding bronc buster.

After the show the losing contestants blew town immediately, heading for the smaller shows about to open in the southwest. The winning riders took it easy for a few days, then gradually began to drift toward Helena and the big stock show.

The Helena show was big money. Coming at a time of the year when shows with the big prize money were stagnant, it drew the top riders from the entire west and southwest. And Ray Lucas squared his shoulders, and a more determined look came into his mild blue eyes when he learned that Eddie Brady was entering this very show.

Eddie drew a dud the first day of the show, and regardless of how he fought the animal the horse refused to more than crow-hop. Disgusted, Eddie jumped from the saddle and raced after the brute to kick him in the rump.

The crowd roared at the antic, but the judges' books showed eight seconds—an unqualifying ride. And it was the judges' score, and not the crowd that paid off.

RAY LUCAS, watching the ride from the side of the arena, shook his head sadly. This was big time, every rider entered in the saddle bronc contest a top notcher. It wasn't smart, Ray realized, for the kid to pull a stunt like that. He'd have to pull himself up by the boot straps now to overcome that bad ride.

Then, from far back in Ray's mind, came the one ray of hope he had been waiting for. It was a comforting thought, one he refused to consider openly. But it was there. This was his chance for top money.

The thought eased the pain in his left leg then and he eagerly awaited the announcement of his name over the P. A. system.

When his turn came, he took advantage of it. Riding a big gray brute of a bucker who showed lots of fight, Ray made one of the best rides in his life.

He had every member of the audience on their feet when the horn sounded. Above the boom of approval, he heard his name screaming from a thousand throats. He felt it then, that surge of confidence he had been lacking since starting the comeback trail.

Eddie met him with outstretched hand before Number Two Chute as he came across the tan bark. Eddie, with his easy grin, supreme confidence still in his young eyes.

The young Canadian said, "Sweet ride, boy. You keep that up and I'm goin' to think some of you Montana boys really *can* ride. Yes sir, Ray, you're going to be a mighty close second this time—and that's no lie."

The few contestants who heard his remark either snorted or spat and walked away in disgust. Ray, when on his way up, and even when he rode the top of the wave for three years, had always had the respect and liking of his brother contestants. He had always remained modest, unassuming, with a smile and soft word for everyone.

Eddie, on the other hand, was a loud mouthed braggart who apparently liked no one but himself. Self-centered, egotistical, he made many enemies and few friends.

There was only one man who understood Eddie and his ways. Pop Gaynor knew the boy, knew that Eddie was living up to his queer standard. Only a fool bragged, Eddie had once told him but it was okay in the books, if you could accomplish what you claimed you could.

Old Pop Gaynor liked the kid. He liked his spirit, his riding ability on the wild ones. He wanted to see the boy keep right on bragging, and fulfilling every boast. He didn't want to ever see Eddie change. And yet, as he watched the days pass, he knew he was going to ask young Brady to back down. He was going to ask the boy to let Ray Lucas take top money in this one show.

It came as no surprise to Pop when, at the eve of the final day of the show, first prize in the saddle bronc riding event had narrowed down to Ray Lucas and Ed-

die Brady. Everyone else was so far behind that they stayed for the finish just in the hope they might draw third money.

On the eve of the big day, Eddie Brady was still a shade behind Lucas in points. And although Eddie had few friends, there was plenty of ready money that he would take first prize.

For regardless of personal feelings, the boy could ride. Hadn't they seen him, day after day, riding like a maniac to close the gap between him and Ray Lucas. The dud he had drawn that first day, gave the fading champ what looked like an impossible lead to overcome.

But Eddie *had* closed the gap. He had pulled almost even because of his extreme egotism. His pride had refused to let him consider failure. His self confidence never let him doubt he could do it. He had all these things so necessary to a champ, plus the one important factor—ability.

CHAPTER IV

Eddie's Way

IN THE dining room of the Lexington Hotel that night, Eddie himself had gone from table to table, offering odds he would take first prize. He found some takers, but many ignored him. Even Ray Lucas, with a soft smile of amusement, refused to bet on the outcome.

Eddie was almost broke when he reached his hotel room later that night. He came into the room with that wide happy-go-lucky grin of his, and then gave a shout of pleasure as he found Pop Gaynor waiting for him.

The kid scaled his snow white Stetson across the room at the old man and followed it up. He jumped on Pop's lap, rumpled his gray hair, and gave him a bear hug.

"Dang your eyes, Pop!" Eddie said. "Dang your ornery old eyes!" He choked up with affection and couldn't say more. He knew Pop was one of the few people who really liked him, and the sight of the man's warm smile of greeting helped erase the snorts of disgust, and the obvious slights of the past few weeks.

"Where in blazes you been, Pop?" he asked finally. "When did you hit town?"

Pop smiled. "Been in town since the show opened, son. Tried to get a job as stock tender, but they was all filled up. Leastways that's what they told me. Reckon they think I'm gettin' a mite too old."

Eddie stood up. "Too old, bosh!" Why you're—" He quieted suddenly. "Who said there was no jobs open, Pop? Was it that miserable little rat of a stock boss, Joe Adams?"

Pop grinned and motioned Eddie to a chair. "Take her easy, boy. Sit down and take her easy. I knowed you'd act like this, that's why I didn't want you to know I was in town."

Pop stopped smiling. "Fact is, I wouldn't be here even now, a keepin' you from your needed sleep. But I come to ask a favor of you." Pop leaned forward slightly. "It's a mighty big favor, Eddie boy, so think careful afore you go to makin' promises."

Eddie's brow furrowed and he rested back on the bed, elbows propping him up. "What is it, Pop?" he asked seriously.

The old gent shifted uncomfortably. He loaded his pipe and lit it, studying Eddie over the cupped flame.

"You and Ray Lucas are pretty close, ain't yuh, Eddie?"

He smoked in silence at the young man's quiet nod. "You figure you can beat him, boy?" he asked after a time.

Eddie grinned. "I think I'll win, Pop. Sure, I got to win. I bet all my money on myself."

Pop Gaynor nodded and stared at the door at the other end of the room. After a while he took the pipe from his mouth and spoke. He was still looking away from the young Canadian as he said;

"I think you can win too, son. Reckon I'm sure of it. That's why I'm askin' you this favor."

He looked straight at Eddie then. "I want you to let Ray Lucas win, boy."

Eddie sat up slowly, no change of expression in his young eyes. It was as though he had been expecting this. He stood up and walked to the half open window, staring down at the rubble of cans behind the hotel.

"Why?" he asked softly.

Pop's voice came steady and even. "He has to win this one, Eddie. That leg of his is about done. I'm surprised he stays on a horse at all, much less keeps a-ridin' like nothing was bothering him. This is his last show, boy. Let him win. There'll be plenty more for you."

"Why?" Eddie repeated.

There was a long pause. Pop said, "He needs the money, son. Needs it bad. He ain't never saved a cent of all the money he's ever won. Most of it went to fellers who were following the shows, but didn't have his luck. He was always giving his dinero to folks not as fortunate as himself.

"And all he knows is horses. He don't know nothing else. With that bad leg of his, when it goes on him he won't be fit for nothin' but tendin' horses, like me."

BEHIND him, Eddie heard Pop rise. "Like I told you before, son, when you get a little old nobody wants you. And I'd kind of hate to see a man like Ray Lucas shoveling droppings."

There was a long silence, then Eddie felt the old man's presence at his left shoulder. "He paid a hospital bill for me couple of years ago, Eddie. It was a right big sum, one I ain't been able to pay back. A man like him, it ain't fair to see him lose his last chance. He could buy himself a little spread with the money and live right."

There was another long silence. Pop finally put his hand on Eddie's shoulder. "You don't owe him nothing, son. And I know it's a tough thing I'm asking, after you bettin' all your money like you did. I reckon I don't blame yuh."

Eddie turned slowly. "It ain't the money, Pop. I got plenty of clothes and stuff. And there's always more to be made at the next show. But—hang it, Pop, I told everybody I'd do it. I told them it would be a cinch."

Pop studied the young man's eyes and read the answer. He nodded and smiled. "It's all right, boy. I know how you feel. And in a way I'm kind of glad you're refusin'."

The final day of the show began in sweltering heat and high humidity. Long before noon the stands were crowded, many of them in their undershirts, the women fanning themselves with creased programs. The stands were uncovered, and on a day when even dogs lay panting in the shade. Yet not one spectator entertained the thought of leaving.

Everyone was aware of the tension and excitement of their neighbor, for all had heard of the numerous bets on the two leading contestants in the bronc riding event. And although some went along with the fading star, the majority were eager to see Eddie Brady win.

The calf roping contest was first on the program, a long drawn-out affair, for both attendants and contestants were slowed by the heat. Then came the bulldogging, and the long afternoon dragged on without too much enthusiasm from the crowd.

Suddenly the crowd tensed as activity began in the bucking chutes. A hush came over the stands as the announcer cleared his throat. Then a roar washed across the arena as Ray Lucas was announced.

The roar died abruptly, and the stands quieted as they watched the tall, slim rider lower himself into the saddle. The chute swung open lazily, and after a second's hesitation, Bottle Top, a rangy black, roared into the arena.

There was no finesse about Bottle Top. A straight away bucker, who worked hard at his trade, the animal headed across the ring.

Ray Lucas rode easily, his body swaying gently, his long legs roweling with perfect pendulum precision. There was nothing fancy here, no attempt to play to the crowd. He rode like a top notch professional, the same way he had always ridden.

When the ride was finished, he let the attendants lift him from the bucker's back, and he waved appreciation to the applause of a polite crowd. Ray Lucas was good, the crowd realized, mighty good. But he made his rides too plain, too common place.

When Ray walked from the arena, the stands forgot him. He had done nothing spectacular, had given nothing in the way of color to make the crowds remember. They sat back and waited patiently for one rider they knew would give them something different.

Eddie Brady was the last man to ride that day. All day he had watched the various contests from the top bar of one of the loading chutes and now, as he heard his name announced, he made up his mind.

He heard the stands stir as he moved toward the chute and he grinned. He felt high, as though he had taken a couple of drinks, and he was sure, at that moment, that he could lick the world.

He still had that glow as he lowered himself onto the broad back of a long legged, wiry mountain horse named Puma.

The chestnut tried to swing his head

and bite the leg that forked him, but Eddie hit the jaw bone with his knee.

THEN the young Canadian nodded and as the gate swung open he laughed. He drove his knees home with a vengeance and the chestnut was bucking before he left the pen.

Splinters flew as he kicked part of the gate, and he stumbled, almost going to his knees at the impact. And the stands roared as Eddie rose in the stirrups and literally yanked the animal back on its feet by pulling on the single rope rein.

Fighting for balance, Puma bucked across the arena. Each second he seemed to change direction, and the crowd rose to its feet to watch Eddie fight the brute. And it was Eddie's fighting, as much as Puma's efforts, that kept the animal on its feet.

Going in crazy circles, Puma sun-fished around the arena.

Twice he almost slammed headon into the wall of the ring, but he swerved just in time.

When the ten-second horn sounded, every spectator was on his feet, yelling like a band of marauding Comanches. Then Eddie gave the show his final touch of color. He ignored the arena attendant's outstretched arm and jumped from the bucking horse. He landed running, went to his knees, then was up and trotting toward the exit.

Grinning broadly, he waved his hat toward the judges' stand and left the arena. For he knew, as surely as though he were marking the score, that he had outnosed Ray Lucas for first honors.

The sun was losing its strength now, but it was still hot, still clammy in the stands. Yet, not one spectator thought of going home. They sat in noisy impatience, waiting for the announcement from the judges that would tell them the winner.

Then suddenly an expectant hush came over the crowd. Soft shadows began to creep across the arena and the spectators saw the announcer step to the mike.

There was mild applause as he named the winner of the calf roping contest. Then time dragged as he went down the list of names for the different events. Time dragged as each contestant stepped forward to accept his prize and the applause of the crowd.

Then the announcer hesitated. He ruffled papers, talked to the judges, and finally cleared his throat. The crowd leaned forward, and he spoke.

"The winner of the first prize in the saddle bronc riding event," he paused, "is the young rider from Canada, that—"

If he said more there were none who heard it, for the roar of approval that greeted his announcement drowned his final words. For long minutes the clamor continued, then died gradually, as the stands realized no one was coming forward to accept the prize.

A sudden silence settled over the ring as people searched for the familiar figure of Eddie Brady. Minutes ticked away but still no one came across the arena toward the foot of the judge's stand.

The mike came to life suddenly as the announcer grasped it. "Will Mr. Edward Brady kindly step forward to receive his prize? Mr. Edward Brady, you have won first prize. Will you please step forward?"

He hesitated, and searched the sides of the ring before him, but nobody made a motion to come forward. The stands began to buzz with curiosity, but no one came to claim the prize.

Five minutes passed, and the announcer spoke again. "Mr. Edward Brady," he said in slight irritation, "will you please come forward to accept your money. We will give you another five minutes, Mr. Brady. If you are not here by then, the judges have no other alternative than to award the prize to the second place winner, Mr. Ray Lucas."

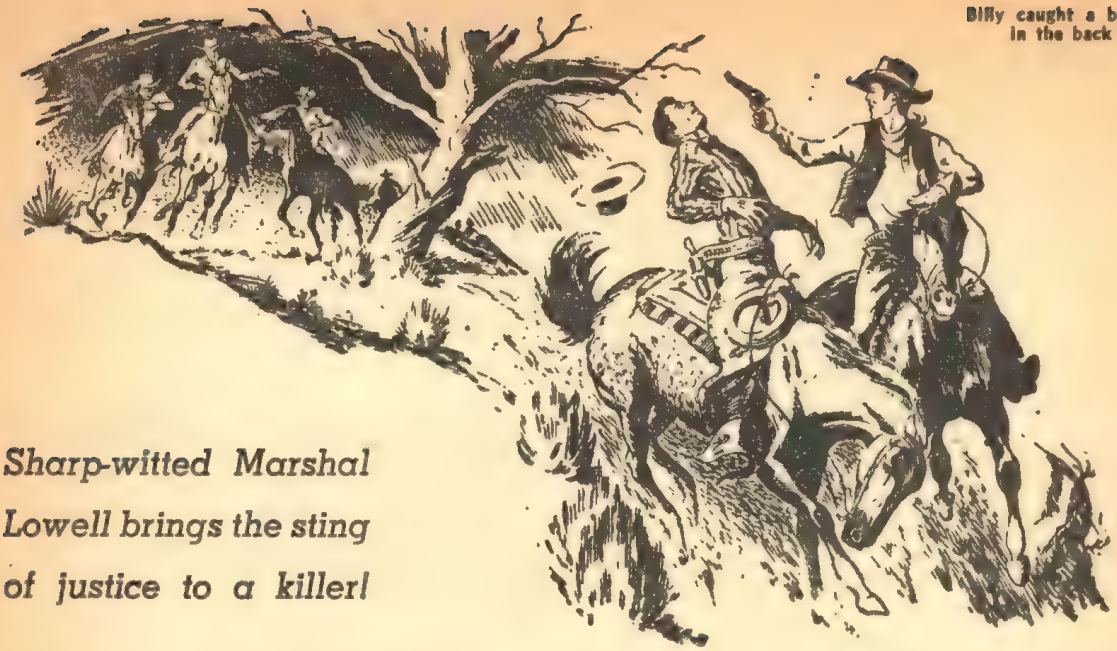
The crowd buzzed angrily, and the announcer continued. "Now don't get excited folks. Those are the rules of the show. Any contestant who is not present to receive his award forfeits his right to the prize."

Behind the wild bronc corral under the stands, a lone figure lay sprawled on a bale of hay. Head resting in the cupped palms of his hands, Eddie Brady listened to the blare of the P. A. system with a wide grin.

He chuckled in amusement, then turned his head as a figure came around the corral and approached him with a friendly smile.

Pop Gaynor sat down beside Eddie and rested his gnarled head on the boy's knee. "Thanks, son," he said softly. "Thanks a-plenty!"

Eddie stopped grinning and there was pride in his eyes as he spoke. "Thanks for what?" he said flatly, "I beat him, didn't I? I said I would."



Billy caught a bullet in the back

Sharp-witted Marshal Lowell brings the sting of justice to a killer!

BAR SPECIAL

By BUCK NORMAN

PURGATORY HARPER guided his jaded chestnut stallion down the short, dusty street that bore the name Division, as announced by a rotting wood sign.

"Dang blast it, horse, I reckon we lost that Marshall Lowell back around. Albuquerque a couple days ago. I figger we got time to hole up here for an hour or two and get the cotton wads out of our jaws. This here Socorro burg may be small but it shore has got a place for me and you to get a drink and some chow."

Harper pulled up his bronc in front of the livery. "Feed and water this here animal," he said, dismounting and sleeving sweat from his sun blackened forehead with a left hand that had only three fingers. "I'll be back to get him in an hour."

"Yes suh," said the old Negro attendant, balefully eyeing the long Colt repeating pistol that nestled, butt out, in the waistband of Purgatory Harper's old Union army trousers. "He'll be ready like yuh said, suh!"

Without replying Harper strode along the sidewalk under the sagging wooden canopy that shielded Socorro pedestrians from the brutal heat of an omnipresent New Mexico sun. Up the street Harper pushed open a pair of batwings that had lost half their once green slats and entered the cool dark of the town's only bar.

Blinking his eyes with the abrupt change from blazing noon to twilight, the tall man walked to the mahogany, his flat-heeled boots making a dull shuffle in the sawdust on the barroom floor.

"Beer, friend," said Harper, digging into a pocket and bringing out a fist full of silver.

The barkeep set an ornate crystal mug on the bar and took his charge from the money Harper had put down. The owl-hoot lifted the mug to his lips with a hand that was grimy with dust and sweat and whose nails were purple and crooked. Savoring the beer like a man who has been dry for a long time, he drained the stein in one long pull.

"Just fill her up again and keep her comin', friend. I plan to float out of here."

"Yuh must be a stranger around here, otherwise yuh'd know that this brew is Mexican and four glasses'll fix a man right fine."

"In that case better set 'em on that table at the end of the bar along with a plate

of hard boiled eggs. I might as well get drunk settin' down!"

CALMLY nibbling a hard boiled egg and sipping a second draught of Mexican beer, Purgatory Harper had time to consider just how he had gotten into his present predicament. He had been running for over a month now from U. S. Marshal Warren Lowell, ever since the third of June when he had held up the mail train outside of Junction, down in Kansas. He thought of Billy Kessler, the kid who had been with him on that deal. Billy had caught a bullet in the back three days later when the posse that rode out from Junction finally overtook them. And then he, Purgatory, had outrun the pack. Days later he heard in a town where he stopped that Lowell was after him.

Harper brought his mind back to the present and slugged down the rest of his drink. In the street he could hear the sound of an occasional passerby but he was the only customer in the saloon. The barkeep set down another mug of beer and pulled out the other chair.

"Where I come from," Harper said, fingering the butt of his pistol with its five deep grooves, "the hired help don't sit with the patrons." He drummed the three fingers of his left hand on the scarred tabletop waiting to see what the half-seated barkeep would do.

"No need to get proddy, traveler. I only wanted to talk with an ex-soldier, as I see by yore pants yuh were," the barkeep said, climbing off the rickety chair.

"Maybe I was a Federal for a little while but I didn't like the food and livin' conditions, so I left," Harper snarled.

Rebuffed, the man turned and walked behind the bar, throwing a nervous look over his shoulder at the unshaven gent in the blue trousers. The barkeep picked up a dirty dust-rag and went to work on a heavy dice table near the door.

"Never knew a feller to be so unsociable when he's travelin' alone like that son of a sea cook," he mumbled as he dusted.

Harper downed the third beer, rose and walked unsteadily to the player piano a few steps from the table. He dropped a piece of silver into the slot and music wheezed into the room. "Do yuh remember sweet Alice Ben Bolt," Harper hummed, staggering back to the table, "sweet Alice Ben Bolt with the hair—"

At that moment the batwings swung open with hurricane force and a man stepped into the place. For a moment the stranger was blind as one of the mice and he didn't see Purgatory Harper sitting sprawled, half-drunk, in his chair. But Harper saw him, saw that it was the man whom he despised above all others, the man whose sworn duty it was to bring him into Kansas City dead or alive—Marshal Warren Lowell.

YANKING his Colt from its resting place, Harper lifted the gun sluggishly to eye level and took careful aim.

"Hey mister! Look out!" the barkeep shouted at Lowell as he slammed out the batwings to the safety of the street.

At that moment Harper triggered and Lowell regained his eye-sight. The bullet went wild, thudding into the floor at Lowell's boot tips and sending up a cloud of sawdust. The crash of the shot mingled with the rattle of "Sweet Alice Ben Bolt" which was still grinding from the piano.

"Pretty bad shooting, Harper," Lowell drawled easily, his voice sounding above the last notes of the song. "I figgered to find yuh here. Mighty careless of yuh to stop just cause yuh thought I had lost yore trail. As yuh can see I haven't, and this shore looks like the end for yuh, pardner. I'm callin' on yuh to give up in the name of the United States Government."

"Do me a favor and go straight to blazes, Lowell. One of us has made a bad mistake comin' here. I'm darn tired of runnin', so I guess it's yore error. This is the place they put up yore tombstone, lawman!"

Harper dived unsteadily behind the bar. It afforded excellent cover and commanded a view of the entire place. Seeing that Harper was not just being funny, Warren Lowell moved fast. He up-turned the heavy dice table so that it furnished protection from Harper's lead, and jumped behind it.

"This," Lowell yelled, "will go down in Socorro history as Harper's last stand."

"Don't be too shore, Lowell, it might be just the opposite!" So saying Harper pulled his trigger, and a slug jammed into the wall high above Lowell's head.

Looking over at the table where the outlaw had been sitting, the marshal saw the three empty oversize beer mugs and figured Harper was under the weather.

"Yuh might just as well give up now, Purgatory. Yuh're so drunk yuh couldn't hit the side of the Alamo with a Gatling

gun," Lowell shouted, sending a bullet into the bar in front of Harper.

"That's what *you* think," the outlaw hooted, and he splintered the wall high over the lawman's head again. Almost at once Lowell heard an ominous buzzing above the exact spot where he crouched.

Squinting, he saw next to a hole in the wall where a ray of sunlight showed through, a nest of hornets. Circling the nest were a half dozen of the brown stingers, investigating the source of the disturbance.

NOW Lowell realized that Harper was far from drunk and that he was fiendishly clever. For the marshal knew that when that nest fell, it would tumble into his lap, and no man alive could long stand the stings of enraged hornets.

Desperately Lowell triggered three shots in succession, thumbing his hammer vigorously. A shower of splinters and wood dust flew from the mahogany, but the bullets failed to frighten Harper.

Again the desperado fired, and the lawman saw the shot enter the beam on which the hornets were making their home. The nest began to sway and the buzzing became louder and louder.

Marshal Warren Lowell had an idea. Ripping his black silk neckerchief from his throat, the lawman held two corners in each hand, turning the scarf into a bag-like receptacle.

"This is the one, friend," Harper shouted, and his lead slammed into the beam.

The nest fell free, but Lowell was ready. He gathered it in like Abner Doubleday spearing a fly ball, and brought the ends of the bandanna together. Whirling the scarf once around his head for momentum, he let go the buzzing parcel and watched it sail through the air. It landed with a thump behind the bar next to the killer, Harper. Instantly the air was filled with a thunderous drone, mingled with the shouts and curses and moans of the owlhoot, as he was attacked by a hundred of the wicked devils.

Suddenly a figure climbed over the bar pursued by a swarm of hornets. It plunged through the batwings and flung itself headlong into the horse watering trough, outside.

A moment later Marshal Lowell peeked out the door and saw that Harper was still under water and that the hornets were leaving. A broad grin crossed the lawman's handsome face.

"That last treat, Harper, was on the house," he said.

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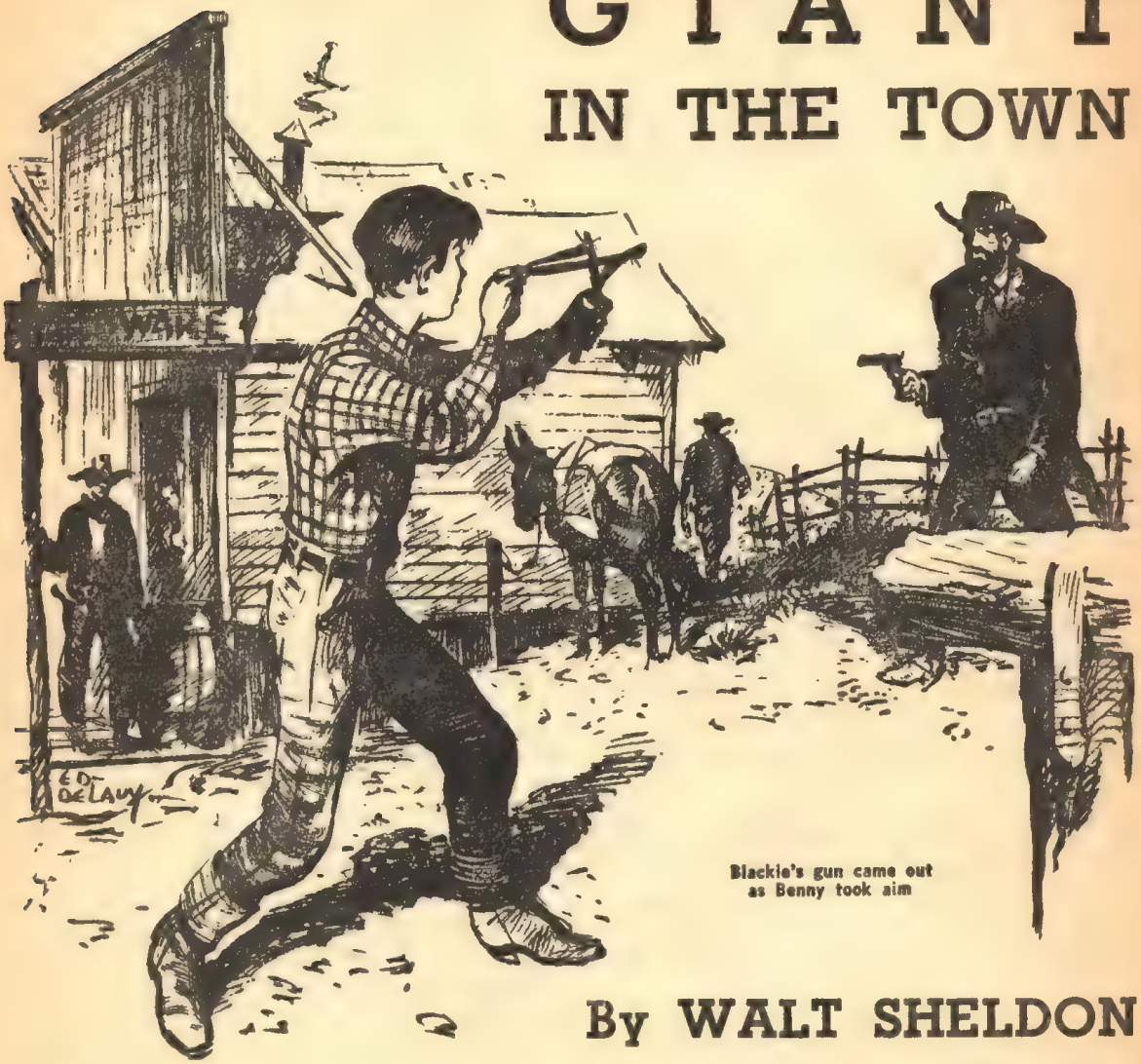

Blackie's gun came out as Benny took aim

By WALT SHELDON

"STAY right here and don't go runnin' off and play-actin'," said Uncle Obie, parking Benny in front of the dry goods store. Uncle Obie didn't want a ten year old boy underfoot when he transacted business with the wool buyers. Benny nodded, not really hearing. He was staring at an object in the store window—a guitar with all the strings and a tasseled, red neck cord.

Benny's eyes became large and dreamy. Uncle Obie knew that look. It meant he'd have to shout three or four times to make the boy hear. The boy could get the durndest ideas. The time Uncle Obie told him about Moses, dog-gone if he didn't sit on the bank of Vermejo crick all day, thinking maybe the waters would part for him. Uncle Obie sighed, shook his head, and moved off.

The guitar, with its sweeping curves and shiny flanks, put Benny's ten-year-old imagination into a fast lope. Already he saw himself plucking wondrous melodies from it, and singing like the *vaqueros*, with their silver mounted saddles and fancy rigs. Uncle Obie had told him about them.

Dreaming now, he forgot the little shack and the sheep corral in the hills. He forgot the long nights under the stars. He forgot the terrible day, long

ago, when the man named Uncle Obie found him huddled in the rocks, then found Indian sign in the charred shell of a squatter's home.

Benny even forgot what he'd noticed about the town this trip; the quietness of the streets, the locked doors, the way men looked over their shoulders and got nervous from mere shadows.

As he stood there looking in the window, some men gathered on the edge of the porch, just behind him. At first he barely noticed them, and they certainly were only vaguely aware of him. They talked in low tones. It was the sudden, tight way in which one of them spoke that finally turned Benny's head.

The man said, "Here he comes, Judge!"

Benny saw then that they were all looking across the street at the entrance to the Quivira Hotel and Saloon. The man addressed as "Judge" was white-haired, plump, and wore a black broadcloth coat that came almost to his knees. Benny heard him answer, "I see him. Keep your fingers crossed."

And then Benny looked across the street and saw the giant.

The man who stepped from the saloon porch must have neared seven feet in his boots. His beard was thick and black, and his mouth was an ugly red stroke in the middle of it. The skirt of his coat stayed back on the right side, exposing a fancy, brocaded waistcoat. It stayed back because the stock of a holstered pistol held it there.

As Benny stared, the huge man paused and looked up and down the street. People disappeared into doorways, or pretended to be busy looking into windows. They kept their faces turned, except for hasty looks. And if they had been headed toward the saloon, they changed direction.

The men just in front of Benny were breathing in short, nervous gasps. He had heard Uncle Obie breathe that way once, when they thought they were trapped by a flash flood in the canyon.

"There's Parker!" the Judge suddenly whispered.

About fifty yards down the street a thin, slow-moving, serious-looking man had appeared and was walking toward the giant. His hat was pushed back on his head, exposing short locks of sandy hair, and the rawhide knot of the hat cord bounced a little on his chest each time he took a step. A gun scabbard was tied down to his right trouser leg. He held his hands slightly away from his sides, wrists bent, fingers cupped.

The black-bearded giant saw him coming. He stepped forward very slowly, until he reached the middle of the street. Then he turned and faced the slender man. His smile made a lopsided mark across his beard. He stood with his feet apart, hips forward.

"Blackie can't buffalo Parker. He *can't,*" said the Judge. His legs were stiff, his whole body tense.

"But what if he does?" asked one of the other men.

The Judge shrugged in an annoyed way. "Then we'll draw lots again."

NOW the whole street was in the grip of a hot silence, and the slender, sandy-haired man and the giant were the only two living things in it. The packed clay dirt with its thin coat of dust threw back the eye-stinging yellow of the sun. Pointed shadows from posts and porch corners looked like tarpaper cut-outs pasted on the ground. There was the thin smell of dry heat.

Blackie's big shoulders swayed forward; Parker was not much more than twenty-five yards away. A horse in front of the Quivira switched at a fly with his tail, and it seemed a shocking, violent movement; too sudden, too real for this queer, slow dream.

Blackie's voice suddenly broke heavily over all of it. It was a deep voice, and it sounded as though it echoed around in his chest a few times before it came out.

"Go ahead, Parker!" he roared. "Draw if yuh dare! I wanna burn yuh down for the fun of it!"

Parker's step lagged just a little. He was close enough so that Benny could see his eyes, now—they were gray eyes, and they seemed to be floating away somewhere. Parker came to a full stop.

"Oh, no—no, don't stop!" breathed the Judge.

"Buffaloed!" said one of the other men. "It's just somethin' *about* Blackie—"

Parker turned away. Lowering his eyes, and keeping his shoulders back hard, he walked away from the path that would have carried him to the giant.

"That's bein' smart, Mr. Parker!" Blackie shouted to him, laughing. Parker didn't look up. Blackie widened the red

gash across his beard, and turned, swinging in a slow circle for everyone to see. It was plain what that grin said. *I'm Blackie. I'm top man in this town. You never know when you're safe. I might kill you for lookin' at me funny. Or maybe just for no reason at all.*

The Judge, and the others, stood in the shade of the porch as Blackie went up the street. They didn't talk until he had turned off, out of sight.

"Parker ain't a coward," one of the men said then. "Never was. But he got buffaloed."

"What is it?" asked another. "What is it about Blackie? He just looks at you and your toes feel like cold water in your boots."

The Judge was running his finger back and forth on the bottom of his chin. "It's because he's *all* bad," he said, "Most bad men have a little streak of good in 'em. It's their weakness. Just like the streak of bad in good men. Not Blackie. He'd shoot down a woman or a child or a hound dog, quick as he'd shoot a man. And the whole town's goin' bad on acount of it. Families are movin'. There'll be more trouble."

"Somebody's got to get Blackie," said the first man. "Somebody's *got* to get him. . . ."

"Uncle Obie," said Benny, as they were riding back into the hills. "Why do they have to get Blackie?"

Obie turned sharply. The boy didn't miss a trick. Obie had heard about most of what Benny had seen, but he'd never have guessed that Benny saw anything, from the way the button was standing and gazing at the guitar after he got back, just like when he'd left him. He'd come puffing when he heard that Ed Parker had drawn lots to get Blackie in front of the Quivira.

Now, they were several miles out of town, Obie on his black horse, Benny on the little buckskin mare, and a pack animal trailing behind. In spite of their short stay, Obie had obeyed the frontier habit of packing along practically everything they owned.

Obie studied the boy a mite before he answered. He'd developed that precaution after learning that this slender, thoughtful lad with the large, dark eyes never asked a question unless he had a couple of follow-up ideas in mind. And if Obie made a quick, absent-minded answer, the boy could sure get him twisted up sometimes.

So after a bit, Obie said, "A man like Blackie just happens once in a while. He's got to live by killin'. Other men don't like him, and he don't like them, and it's hard to say who started not likin' the other first. Somebody's got to get him sooner or later, so's the others can live. I guess Blackie's kinda like that feller in the Bible—Goliath."

Obie realized his mistake almost as soon as he spoke. He saw the boy switch around in the saddle and fix those dark eyes on him eagerly.

"What feller in the Bible, Uncle Obie?"

When Uncle Obie started talking about the Bible, it generally meant a story, and Benny loved stories above all other things.

"Oh, he was just a giant got killed by a feller named David," said Obie. He knew it was hopeless to think that Benny would let it go at that.

"A giant?" Benny asked. "Is Blackie a giant?"

"Well, kind of," said Uncle Obie.

He sighed. A mighty fine boy, Benny, and a real pleasure to Obie ever since he'd found him in the rocks. But he was sure over-fond of stories and play-acting. He'd get off alone and talk to himself and go through all kinds of motions all the time. Obie wasn't too sure that was the best thing for a young one. But he'd probably outgrow it.

"All right, Benny," he said. And he told him the story of David and Goliath.

There was only one interruption—which was better than usual. Benny wanted to know what a psalm was. Then he wanted to know if Uncle Obie knew the words to any. Obie could remember a line or two of the twenty-sixth, but he didn't exactly feel like talking religious, so he said he didn't know any. When he came to the part about David hurling the stone from a sling, Benny's eyes were bright as embers.

OBIE kept having an uneasy feeling that maybe he shouldn't have told the story to the boy. The time he told him about Aladdin he sat up all night trying to rub a genie out of a lamp. Obie kept stealing glances at him all the way to Eight-mile Camp, where they were to spend the first night. But Benny just rode along quietly, staring ahead. He was thinking, all right. Turn-

ing stories and play acting over and over in his mind. But then he always did that.

By the time they turned in, Obie had forgotten about it.

Benny lay very still under his blanket, arms back of his head. He could look out of the lean-to and see the long valley spread out below, and the blue-black sky roll away above. He watched the stars for a while, and made pictures out of them. He thought about David, who slew the Philistine and whose people made him a king.

Benny's picture of David was of a boy about his own age, but somehow taller and browner and stronger; he wore Levi Strauss pants and a wool shirt and sported the most magnificent of snow-white, broad-brimmed hats. The slopes on which David herded sheep were pretty much like the slopes of this valley, yellow and brown and green all mixed together in an off-shade and dotted with piñon. As for Goliath—he could picture him no different in any detail from the giant, Blackie.

While the big dipper rolled around the north star, Benny relived the slaying of Goliath. The fantasy jelled more and more into reality.

Uncle Obie's breathing was loud and steady, but Benny didn't let that make him careless. A man who lived in the hills learned to sleep lightly. Benny moved very cautiously. After he was standing, he threw the blanket back into a crumpled mass that might look as though he were under it. He went to his war bag, untied the strings and fumbled very quietly. When he stepped outside of the lean-to, he had his hunting knife in one hand, and a long pair of black stocking garters in the other. They were part of the town outfit Uncle Obie had bought when he entertained the idea of sending Benny to school.

It took Benny a few minutes to find the tree with just the right size fork. And for a few minutes more, he hacked at it, slicing rather than chopping, to keep from waking Uncle Obie. When the forked stick came free he whittled down the rough edges. Then he folded the garters double, cut them to size, and carefully fastened them to the wood. He looked around and found a stone. Placing it in the elastic, he drew his arm back, aimed toward the valley, and let go.

The stone sailed high and far. Benny lost sight of it, and then stood still until he heard it clatter way down on the hillside. He smiled and nodded his head. Quietly, he went to saddle the buckskin mare. . . .

The Quivira Hotel and Saloon looked bare and cheap in the morning light. The front doors to the bar were open but the windows were still shuttered. As Benny walked inside, he had to blink several times to adjust his eyes to the dim interior, and he had to sniff once or twice before he got used to the musty smell of spilled whisky and mopped floors.

Only a few men were at the bar, and Benny recognized only one of them. It was Parker, the slender, sandy-haired man who had faced Blackie in the street yesterday. All of the men turned and looked at Benny; it was Parker who spoke.

"Boy—what're you doin' in a place like this?" He was grinning, like the rest, in good-natured disapproval.

Benny was going to tell them, and then it came to him suddenly that the truth would probably turn those good-natured grins into raucous laughs. Benny didn't like to be laughed at.

"Oh—nothin', sir," he said. "Just lookin' around."

"Well, you run along, now," said Parker.

Benny looked to one side, squinted at the back of the saloon, and into the corners.

"Who you lookin' for, boy? Your daddy?"

"No, sir," said Benny. He frowned and edged unwillingly toward the front door.

Parker said, "Go on, now, young 'un. Better get outa here before Blackie shows up. He don't like boys much."

Benny pricked up his ears. That was what he had wanted to know. Blackie was on his way to the Quivira, then. He nodded to Parker, then turned and walked out of the place.

In a moment he was seated against a porch post, legs pulled to his chest, arms wrapped around his knees. He waited. A few minutes later Parker and some of the others emerged. They were busy talking; they didn't notice the boy seated there. Benny heard them mention Blackie's name as they passed. They crossed the street diagonally and entered a wooden building marked LAW OFFICE.

Through the windows, Benny could see them talking to the stout, white-haired man they called "Judge."

Benny began to fidget now. He stretched his neck to look far up the street in the direction of the livery stable, and he twisted his shoulders to stare in the direction of the hills. He knew that Uncle Obie would show up from that direction pretty soon. And the chances were pretty good that Uncle Obie, on the way in, would have cut himself a thin switch for the seat of Benny's pants.

IT WAS sure funny how grown-ups, even smart ones like Uncle Obie, just couldn't understand some things. Uncle Obie *knew* that David, in that story, had killed Goliath because it was supposed to happen that way; Benny hadn't doubted it one minute. And Uncle Obie had assured him several times that the story was true. But of course it happened a long time ago, and Benny guessed that made it easier to believe than something that was happening right under Uncle Obie's nose. It would be hard to explain to Uncle Obie how Benny knew—*just knew*—what he was going to accomplish.

He was thinking they might even make him mayor, like they'd made David king.

The pleasant picture of Benny, as mayor, bowing to everyone and officiating at some kind of festive ceremony, was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Blackie coming down the street.

Blackie walked with long, slow steps and he used his toes more than his heels. It was the walk of a man who might have to move quickly on much less than an instant's notice. He looked around him constantly. He kept his hands loose at his sides. His long coat was still pushed back on the right side and hooked there by the butt of his pistol.

He wasn't Blackie to Benny. He was Goliath.

Benny was thinking of what Uncle Obie had said. "He's got to live by killin'. Other men don't like him, and he don't like them, and it's hard to say who started not likin' the other first. Somebody's got to get him sooner or later, so's the others can live." Benny was the ordained "somebody." He had no doubt of it.

He got up off the porch and stepped to the middle of the street. Taking the slingshot and a stone from his pocket he watched the approaching giant. But as the big, black-bearded man came nearer, a little tug of fear began to pull at Benny's stomach. He spoke quickly, before he'd have time to feel it too much.

"Blackie," he called out in a husky soprano, "prepare to meet yore maker!" He pulled the sling, and took aim.

Blackie stopped. His forehead wrinkled into a thin strip as he raised his eyebrows. His open mouth was a little, dark hole for a moment; then it spread into the same, unbalanced, ugly grin.

"Boy! Put that down!" he roared. "Put that down and sashay! Waltz, boy!"

Benny let the stone fly. The double elastics propelled it with considerable speed. It missed, and went over Blackie's left shoulder. Now, Blackie looked *very* surprised. So fast that he couldn't have had time to think about it, his hand made a blur of movement—and a heavy pistol was pointed at the boy. Benny stared at it. At the same time the edges of his vision told him that people were coming from doors and alleys and flocking to windows to watch. He reached quickly for another stone.

The tip of the pistol wavered for just a moment, and then Blackie said, "All right, boy. It's lesson time." He slipped the gun back into its holster, and continued to come forward. He wasn't smiling any more.

This time Benny took very careful aim. Blackie was no more than twenty feet away when he loosed the second stone. Blackie ducked and put his arm up as the missile came; it struck his head just under the brim of his hat, and dislodged the hat a little. He clamped his hand to his head.

"Why, yuh dirty little maverick!" He rushed the boy.

Benny felt huge fingers clamp themselves to the back of his collar. He felt himself lifted until his toes weren't touching the ground. He looked up. Blackie's coffee-black eyes were very small and shiny, and there were little red streaks in the white part.

"Boy! Do you know who I am?" roared Blackie.

Benny didn't answer. His skin felt cold and wet, like a wooly's nose. The little tug in his stomach had grown to a strong pull. Something had gone wrong,

he was sure of that. Maybe he hadn't picked the right time, or perhaps he should have learned to sing those psalms first. Blackie was going to kill him, he was sure of that, too. It was that way in the hills; there was no middle ground; the loser always died. Altogether he was terribly frightened—yet desperately angry. He did the only thing he could think of. He struck back furiously with his fists.

"Boy—yuh got to learn respect fer yore betters!"

Blackie held on to Benny, taking his blows in a detached way. Then, suddenly, he lifted his arm high, slashed it downward, and brought the back of his big hand across Benny's cheek. Benny heard the noise of the blow all the way to the back of his skull; he felt it far down his spine. Now Blackie brought the hand back the other way in a hard, open-handed slap. Benny felt his jaw rock with it. He saw bright, flashing things, and felt weights on his eyelids.

"Boy, I'm goin' to break ever' bone in yore body!"

The black beard shook as Blackie continued to slap the boy. Then the giant reached with his free hand and grasped Benny by the seat of his pants; he lifted him high, and slammed him to the dirt.

THE world went suddenly out of focus—like a picture of an earthquake. There were diagonal scratches of bright light and things seemed to be swaying. Benny's chest felt as though a huge tourniquet were tightened around it. He knew that he moved a little, but he didn't feel the pain of the blow when Blackie kicked him in the side.

And then a soft voice was saying, "Turn around, Blackie. Turn around and get it."

Benny recognized the voice of Mr. Parker. He was dimly aware of tall shadows moving above him. He heard two gun shots. Three. . . .

When he could see and hear better, he could also feel more pain. There was a swaying motion; he was being carried. He saw Uncle Obie's face, a curious mixture of animadversion and sympathy. A little off to one side was the round face and white hair of the man they called the Judge. He was looking right at Benny, and saying something.

". . . You're a mighty brave kid. Mighty brave. But you ought to have known better . . ."

Then he heard Parker's soft tones again. Mr. Parker was on the other side.

"Can you hear me, kid? Can you see me? I want to thank you personal. Took a boy like you to show me how to keep from bein' buffaloed. I'd 'a' never had the nerve to stand up to Blackie without you did what you did."

"He oughta of known better," said Uncle Obie. "Benny, you was awful foolish to believe that—"

"Maybe it's that kind of foolish believin'," interrupted Parker, "it takes to fight a man like Blackie."

"Is the giant slain?" asked Benny in a tired, almost dreamy voice.

"Huh?" said the Judge. Then he brought his eyebrows down again. "Oh, the giant. You mean Blackie. Yes, sonny, he won't trouble folks again. Now you just lay still 'til we get you to the doc's. When you get some rest, you can have anything you want. I'll see to that."

Benny closed his eyes then. The pain was dull enough now so that by pressing his teeth together hard he could pretty well stand it. He was thinking he wouldn't take advantage of the Judge's offer outright, because that wouldn't be very polite. But he'd fix it somehow so the Judge would find out that he wanted that guitar with the red neck cord.

And he was sure somebody would know the words to some psalms, so he could sing them up in the hills—just like in Uncle Obie's story.

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The bronc hooks a front hoof on the top wire

FEUD BUSTERS

A Cactus City Story by L. P. HOLMES

THERE JUST ain't nothin' that can stir up the devil and put a rock under it, like a feud can. Folks who go to feudin' lose all sense of proportion an' get so they don't show a lick of respect for the rights of their feller citizens. Any innocent person who gets in the way of a feud is plumb liable to wake up an' find both sides gunnin' for his hide. That's a lesson which I and Puggy Jimpson an' Shoo-fly Davis learns the hard way.

There's I and Puggy and Shoo-fly down in Pleasant Valley along Wiggly Crick, screenin' gravel. Not that the three of us is what you'd call real fond of the chore of screenin' gravel, but it's just one more of them things that's set us to hatin' fat Willie Weehaw so bad that our mouths pucker up like we'd just bit into a green persimmon, every time we mentions his name.

Fat Willie, if you didn't know it before, runs the general store in Cactus City, an' he's all broke out with a bad dose of what he calls civic pride. He'd jest got through promotin' a rodeo which was, as he puts it, to enhance the fame of our fair city. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we got to admit she turned out to be a purty dang good rodeo, even if we did have to do most of the work in buildin' up an arena. But while Shoo-fly scampered off with the

For once, Shoo-Fly Davis and his pards Puggy Jimpson and Ike Ferris do something that doesn't rile Sheriff Bates!

bronc bustin' championship, I and Puggy dang near got ourselves crippled for life, tryin' to hold up our end of the show. Puggy, he tackles the calf ropin' and gets kicked so hard and center, his nose is still pointin' a mite to the east whilst his eyes is lookin' west.

Me, I takes a whirl at the bulldoggin'. Somethin' happens which I ain't figgered out since, an' that rodeo has been history now for goin' on six weeks. Anyhow, when I dives for my critter I kinda overshoot an' I lands smack on my face in rodeo dust—*ker-whop*! Never let it be said, gentlemen, that Ike Ferris is a softie. Just the same, I ask you man to man, lives there a man who can dive off'n a tall horse an' dig up half a rodeo arena with the flat of his face an' not feel that he'd done his full civic duty by any town?

I figgers I'd spread out enough civic duty to last me from then on, an' so does Puggy. Likewise Shoo-fly. But not fat Willie Weehaw. No siree! Fat Willie ain't willin' to let well enough alone. So he starts yappin' around that the main street of Cactus City is a disgrace. 'Specially in winter, when, so Willie claims, it's nothin' but a mud hole, a bottomless bog.

Which ain't true at all. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly admits there's a purty fair to middlin' chuck hole in front of Tug Stevens' Oasis Saloon. That's the one which a prospector lost his burro in. That fool prospector shoulda knowed better. But he comes into town one rainy day, ridin' this burro an' the burro steps into this chuck hole. Him an' the prospector goes plumb outa sight. Bosco Bates, our sheriff, sees it happen an' he drags the prospector out by the neck before the durn fool can git drowned. They never did find no trace of the burro, an' fat Willie Weehaw keeps bringin' this happenstance up all the time he's arguin' about gettin' that street fixed up.

Shucks! What's one lil' ol' burro? Or a stray prospector, for that matter? The sage brush is full of 'em.

But no. Fat Willie keeps hollerin' until the idee catches on. An' then Bosco Bates he hunts I and Puggy and Shoo-fly up an' sends us down on Wiggly Crick to screen gravel to fill up the chuck holes that Willie Weehaw don't like.

WHICH is allus the way it turns out when fat Willie gets one of his big idees. He does the thinkin' an' I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we has to do the workin'. Bosco Bates sees to that an' we don't dare talk back to him. For Bosco Bates is one big, tough, star packin' hombre any way you look at him.

So there we are, I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, down in Pleasant Valley on Wiggly Crick, screenin' gravel, whilst High Pockets McGee is runnin' the wagon that hauls the fruits of our labors back to Cactus City, which is six miles north.

We'd just screened out another load an' was gathered down in the shade of some willer trees along the crick, restin' our achin' backs an' lettin' our blisters cool off. Shoo-fly, he's gettin' kinda snarly. Runnin' the misery end of a pick an' shovel allus did make Shoo-fly kinda peckish. I an' Puggy, we've growed more philosophical, as the readin' book says. We can take the bitter with the sweet, so to speak. But not Shoo-fly, not that tough lil' hooty-corn.

Shoo-fly parts his whiskers, of which he's got enough for four men, an' plumb drowns a sand lizzard with a mouthful of Boot Jack eatin' tobacco. Then he starts to cuss. He takes fat Willie plumb apart at the seams, an' before he runs outa breath gives Bosco Bates a case of long distance blisters, too.

"Me," he snarls, "I got enough. I got a big plenty. I'm so sick of Willie Weehaw an' Bosco Bates, I hurts all over. I hope to live to see the day when they both gotta wear barb wire underclothes an' get bit by the great dang biggest ol' rattlesnake in Cactus County. I hope—!"

That's just as far as Shoo-fly gets in his hopin' when—*wheeee*!—there's a .30-30 slug comes sailin' through them willer bushes not two foot over our heads. Right after that first 'un comes another an' another, then five or six more.

I reckon I don't need to tell you gentlemen that right then an' there was put on the greatest show of scatterin' an' scramblin' as jest about ever took place. That crick bed had to be flatter'n a table just about there, all exceptin' one lil' ol' spunk hole with about a foot of purty gummy lookin' water in it. Jest the same, a spunk hole is a spunk hole when .30-30 slugs is flyin' here an' yonder plumb carelesslike. Me, Ike Ferris, I ain't a bit proud at times like that. So I dives for that spunk hole, plumb eager-like.

Puggy an' Shoo-fly spots that same spunk hole an' gits to cravin' it, same as I did. So we all hit her together. It ain't

too big a spunk hole to begin with an' with all of us tryin' to snuggle into it, plumb enthusiastic, there was bound to be somebody on the bottom.

It were Shoo-fly an' he was a-blubbin' an a-gurglin' down in that water for quite some time before I an' Puggy recollects and let him come up for air. So up he comes, plumb smeared with slime an' frog spit an' so mad that there water is showin' signs of steamin'.

"What blankety-blank so-an'-so is aimin' to murder us?" he squawls. "I gits my hands on the cross-eyed son who tried to part our hair an' I'll tear his leg off an' beat him to death with the bloody stump of it. Who ever heard tell of such a thing? Deliberate pullin' down at three innercent jiggers with a .30-30!"

"It ain't us," mumbles Puggy. "It's the feud."

"Feud?" snarls Shoo-fly, "what feud."

"The one between the Hicks an' the Jethcoes," says Puggy. "I told Bosco Bates this Pleasant Valley wa'nt no safe place for us to screen gravel. I told him I'd heard talk that there was a feud brewin' in it, but he wouldn't even listen. Now she's brewed an' us three stand a real show of bein' shot to flinders jest because we're standin' betwixt an' between."

"We ain't standin'," snorts Shoo-fly. "We're all scrooged down in this spunk hole up to our ears in water that smells bad an' tastes worse. An' feud or no feud, I'm gettin' outa here an'—"

"Duck!" yells I. "An' shut up the jawin'. Heck with the winders open is comin' up the crick!"

AROUND a bunch of willers a rider has hove into view. He's layin plumb out along his bronc's neck an' he's got both spurs an' a quirt workin' overtime. His bronc is flattened out an' runnin' so fast it's plumb cuttin' a furrow in the gravel. Mebbe this jigger is a hundred yards past them willers when a whole passel of other riders come lickety-pelt along the same trail. Soon's they gets sight of this jigger they're chasin' then they all start shootin'.

Right then an' there Ike Ferris quit lookin' an' started scroogin' deeper into that spunk hole. But not before I feel a .30-30 slug chop a hole in the crown of my hat. I'm tellin' you, gents, them slugs was like a swarm of bees a-hummin' an' a-buzzin' around.

Somebody is tryin' to git closer to the bottom of that spunk hole than I am. It's Puggy an' he's mumblin' somethin' to the Lord about havin' mercy on a pore back-slidin' sinner that promises to reform all over if'n he can ever get back to Cactus City safe and sound. To which I echoes, 'Amen!' plenty fervent.

But not Shoo-fly. No sir! About now Shoo-fly is stewin' mad, an' he's up there at the top of that spunk hole with one eye cocked over the edge so's he can see what's goin' on. An' all the time he's cussin' Hicks an' Jethcoes an' fat Willie Weehaw an' Bosco Bates plumb equal an' indiscriminate.

Well sir, them rifles keep on a-whangin' an' a-snarlin' as that there feud draws further away up crick. Then comes a sound that makes my hair stand plumb up on end like the quills on a porkypine. It's the death scream of a mortal wounded man.

If'n you've never heard that sound, gents, then I hope you never do. For it does somethin' to yore innards. It makes 'em all tie up in a cold knot an' yore mouth goes dry an' you can't breathe. Puggy, he hears it, too, an' he sets up a whimperin' like a scared dawg on a cold night. Then I realize I'm whimperin' jest as bad as Puggy.

But Shoo-fly ain't whimperin'. He's still cussin', then breaks that off to light into I an' Puggy. "Shut up!" he growls. "Quit that mewin' around an' let me lissen. Shut up, I tell you!"

I an' Puggy shuts up. Up crick we hear somethin' that sounds like somebody diggin', a pick clackin' on crick rocks an' then a shovel gratin'. This goes on fer quite a spell, whilst all the time I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly are populatin' that spunk hole plumb to overflowin'. Then we hears hosses comin' back down the crick.

"Oh, Moses!" wails Puggy. "They're comin back to feud us, sure as you're born, Ike. They're gonna murder us right in our beds!"

"Beds!" snarls Shoo-fly. "We ain't in bed. We're in this dang spunk hole that smells like dead catfish an' defunct toads. An' I ain't stayin' in it any longer. I'm goin' up where the air is better even if I do git feuded."

An' durn me if that lil' scratch cat don't crawl out of the spunk hole an' start walkin' around, flappin' his arms an' spreadin' his whiskers to dry. For a min-

ute or two I an' Puggy expect to see Shoo-fly shot dead in his tracks. But he ain't, so we come up for air along side him, for by that time the stirred up muck in the bottom of that spunk hole is really gettin' foul.

"If'n we gotta die," says Shoo-fly, "we might as well die breathin' fresh air. So get yore chins up an' take it like men."

I does my best. I gits my chin up some, even though it is wobblin' plenty. For ridin' right down at us is this flock of Jethcoes, with big Turk Jethcoe in the lead. He's one of these big, dark complected guys, Turk is, with bulgy muscles an' bushy, scowly eyebrows. One of the other Jethcoes is leadin' a riderless bronc, a bay bronc with white points that I'd seen Splinter Hicks up on several times.

Turk Jethcoe reins in an' glares down at us. "You gravel siftin' sons see what happens to Splinter Hicks?" he growls.

"I didn't suh—suh—see too much, Turk," stutters Puggy. "But I huh-heard him. I heard him when he died. Never huh-heard such a gosh-awful screech in all my days. An' I never want to huh-hear nothin' like it again."

"Well, you will," leers Turk. "You will less'n the three of you git plumb out of Pleasant Valley an' stay out. You'll hear yore own death screech. This is feudin' country now, between us an' the Hicks. Anybody we ketch hangin' around in Pleasant Valley will get the same dose we aim to give all the Hicks, jest like we give it to Splinter. You hear?"

"Wuh-wuh-we hear," I gulps.

"A'right," snaps Turk. "Start shaggin' it for Cactus City, an' don't stop for nothin'—nothin', savvy?"

Turk he swings his rifle around to sorta emphasize his point. So I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we don't argue. We start shaggin' it—plenty.

THIS here Wiggly Crick does a lot of jest what its name says, an' with the road follerin' all them twists an' turns, we're soon outa sight of them Jethcoes, who've gone on ridin' down the valley. So now Shoo-fly, he stops an' says, "Hold it, you jiggers. I wanta see somethin'."

"So do I," puffs Puggy between puffs. "I wanta see Cactus City an' the Oasis an' Tug Stevens pourin' from a bottle of corn likker. I shore need somethin' to steady my nerves an' git the taste of that spunk hole water outa my mouth."

"That'll have to wait," says Shoo-fly. "Right now I want to take a look at where they buried Splinter Hicks."

"You crazy!" squalls Puggy. "You askin' to git buried right along side of Splinter? You darn fool, you'll git us all—"

"Quiet!" cuts in Shoo-fly. "I know what I'm doin'. Right yonder's the spot. I'm gonna have a look."

Sure enough, I an' Puggy can see the place. It's the well known long, narrow mound, an' jest the sight of it gives I an' Puggy a new case of the shakes. But it don't seem to bother Shoo-fly too much, for he sashays right over along side of it, looks it over an' sort of paces up an' down beside it, like he was sayin' some last kind words over the dead.

And then, doggone my hide if that onery lil' blister don't go prowlin' off past the grave an' around a point of willer trees starin' at that crick bed like he was figgerin' on pickin' up a handful of diamonds.

"He's loco, Ike," groans Puggy. "Ol' Shoo-fly, he's gone loco on us. The smell of that spunk hole musta made him lose his mind. I've heard tell of such things. Mebbe we better go run him down an' hawgtie him before he gits violent."

Me, I'm wonderin' if this is necessary when here comes Shoo-fly, back around them willers, steppin' along high an' light an' easy. He don't act loco and when he comes over to us, danged if he ain't sorta whistlin' between his teeth an' with a shine in his eyes like he gits when he's plumb interested an' happy over somethin'.

"For a gent who's jest done lookin' plumb down the maw of sudden death, you're shore actin' mighty gay an' careless," scolds Puggy. "You wouldn't be disrespectful of the dead would you, Shoo-fly?"

Shoo-fly's lips peel back in a little snarly grin. "I'm a wolf," he says. "I'm a hound dawg of retribution, sniffin' at the heels of the wicked. I'm an eagle in the sky, strikin' at snakes in the grass."

"Oh Moses!" wails Puggy. "It's true. He's gone loco as a hooty-corn. Grab him, Ike!"

Which I tries to do, but Shoo-fly skips off to one side, fast an' spry as a cricket. "Lemme alone," he snaps. "I know what I'm doin'. C'mon—we're headin' for town."

Now this shore makes sense to I an' Puggy, so we don't waste no more time

arguin'. We lines right out.

Couple of miles along, we meet up with High Pockets MaGee, comin' back with the wagon for another load of gravel. "Where you June bugs goin'?" High Pockets wants to know. "I ain't gonna shovel no load of gravel all by myself, an' you can stick a pin in that."

"We ain't interested in gravel right now," Shoo-fly tells him. "Turn around an' give us a ride back to town."

High Pockets has got his nose all crinkled up, an' he's a-sniffin' an' a-sniffin', whilst I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly climbs into the wagon. "I smell somethin'," says High Pockets. "It don't smell good. Sorta like dead fish."

"It's us you smell," snarls Shoo-fly. "We ain't claimin' to be no flock of wild roses about now. We got good reason to smell. Now turn around an' line out for town."

"Bosco Bates will be plumb cross with us if'n he sees us comin' in with a empty wagon," argues High Pockets. "An' I don't like to be present when Bosco is cross."

"You leave Bosco Bates to me," says Shoo-fly. "Get goin'!"

OF COURSE the first durn person we see when we roll into Cactus City jest has to be Bosco Bates. He comes over, looks at that empty wagon, then looks at us, that mean growl of his startin' to rumble way down in his boots.

"Ain't my fault, Bosco," squawks High Pockets MaGee. "They wouldn't let me git another load of gravel. They made me turn around an' haul 'em back to town."

Bosco, he runs his best scowl over I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly. "You got one chance to explain," he rumbles. "An' it better be good. Why'd you come back to town?"

"We got feuded out, Bosco," says Puggy, quick-like. "That's gospel. That Pleasant Valley feud is rollin', high an' wicked. Had we tried to stay on, screenin' gravel, we'd all been dead men now."

Bosco stares hard at pore Puggy. "Feud! What feud? What you drivin' at, anyhow?" A sudden thought strikes Bosco an' he steps closer, sniffin'. "I don't smell whiskey, like you'd got hold of a jug somewhere. But I do smell somethin', like a dawg that's been rollin' in the remains of a month dead sheep. Quit talkin' in circles an' git down to earth."

"Puggy's right, Bosco," I chimes in. "Them Hicks and the Jethcoes have shore got that feud of theirs a-rollin'. We saw some of it. We saw Turk Jethcoe an' his crowd run down Splinter Hicks an' shoot him plumb to death. An' we saw the grave where they buried him. An' then Turk Jethcoe he told us if'n we didn't want some of the same we'd better high-tail outa Pleasant Valley an' stay out. Naturally, not honin' to be feuded, I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we hightailed."

Bosco still looks kinda unconvinced. "You're tryin' to say you saw Splinter Hicks shot down by the Jethcoes, an' buried by them?"

"Well," says I, "if'n you want it plumb exact, we did see 'em shootin' at Splinter. We didn't see him when they finally got lead into him."

"But we heard him die," puts in Puggy quicklike. "Yessir, we shore heard him die. Most gosh-awful screech I ever heard in my life, his death yell was. An' then we saw his grave."

All this time Shoo-fly ain't said a word, jest perchin' there on the side of the wagon, whistlin' softlike through his teeth. Bosco looks at him. "What's yore version of the affair, Shoo-fly?" Bosco wants to know.

"Somethin' I'd like to relate to you in private, Bosco," chirps Shoo-fly, pert as you please. "All that you smell ain't just the spunk water an' mud which I an' Ike an' Puggy been wallerin' in. You're also smellin' somethin' that is rotten in Pleasant Valley. I'd shore like to talk it over with you."

Bosco stares hard at Shoo-fly, then jerks a nod. "Come on over to my office, Shoo-fly. Ike, you an' Puggy better go an' git yoreselves all tangled up with plenty hot water an' lye soap, else you'll have all the buzzards in Cactus County follerin' you around. Great Christmas!"

I an' Puggy line out for our little cabin on the edge of town, start water cookin' an' lay out some clean clothes. We also lays out a pint of corn likker an' kills it. We got ourselves plumb scrubbed an' fragrant again when Shoo-fly comes stalkin' in. He sees that empty pint which Puggy has forgot to hide an' gives us a cussin' out for bein' greedy. But somehow he ain't too mad, an' he's got a smug, cat an' canary look about him while he borrows our wash tub an' hot water an' soap. Out of the foam an' bubbles he tells us that we're to grab a bite to eat an' then report at Bosco Bates' office.

On the way over to Bosco's office we

bumps into fat Willie Weehaw who's been out deliverin' a load of groceries to somebody. Willie looks us over plumb haughtylike an' demands to know why we ain't down along Wiggly Crick, screenin' gravel. Shoo-fly, he looks Willie up an' down, plenty hostile.

"I'm tellin' you somethin', Willie Weehaw," grits Shoo-fly. "If'n you don't lay off cookin' up idees which end up with I an' Ike an' Puggy breakin' our mortal backs at man-killin' labor, then one of these days I gits you down an' I tromp on you until yore liver changes places with yore lights. An' that's whatever!"

NOW fat Willie is plumb pompous at times, but there is a heap more lard in him than there is salt. So now, with Shoo-fly layin' the chips down, hard an' crisp, Willie gulps, licks his lips, backs away an' scuttles off about his business.

"That big pot-walloper!" snaps Shoo-fly. "He gits in my hair worse'n a handful of wood ticks."

We finds Bosco Bates waitin' for us, kinda impatient. Right away he goes over to his gun rack an' begins stackin' out a Winchester an' a big Colt sixgun for each of us, plus plenty fodder for them shootin' guns.

"Wh—what's the big idee, Bosco?" Puggy wants to know. "We ain't goin' huntin' are we?"

"We're goin' feud bustin'," growls Bosco. "We—"

"Oh, no," yelps Puggy, quicklike. "Not me. I ain't yearnin' to bust no feud. I ain't yearnin' to even come close to no feud. Right today down on Wiggly Crick I saw enough feudin' to last me the rest of my life."

"You're gonna do what I say an' no back talk," growls Bosco. "I'm callin' you for posse duty, an' when I calls you answer or I lock you up in my jail house until the fleas gnaw you plumb down to a shadow. You hear?"

Puggy groans an' gives in. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we've had dire experience with that flea pasture which is Bosco's jail house. Speakin' personal, me, Ike Ferris, I'd rather fight a nest of wildcats whilst tied hand an' foot, than I would spend one minute in Bosco's house of torture. Puggy's feelin' the same way, which is why he quits arguin'.

Bosco's got saddle broncs rounded up for us an' she's jest turnin' sunset when we ride out of town, headin' south for Pleasant Valley. By the time we gits down on Wiggly Crick to where pore Splinter Hicks lies buried, she's runnin' on toward deep dusk, with the shadders layin' thick an' blue an' still an' the whole thing kinda owly, an' a fit place for ghosts to start flittin' around.

I an' Puggy are feelin' plenty shivery an' jumpy, but Shoo-fly an' Bosco don't seem to be affected nohow. Bosco leads us right over to Splinter Hicks' grave an' sits there in his saddle, lookin' down at it. He jerks his head in a nod an' says, "You're right, Shoo-fly. Amble down to where you fellers were screenin' gravel an' bring a couple of shovels."

Shoo-fly spurs away an' is soon back with the shovels. "A'right," says Bosco to I an' Puggy. "Grab them shovels an' start diggin' "

"You mean," quavered Puggy, "for us to dig up pore Splinter?"

"That's what," says Bosco. "If'n you can find him. Which I doubt. Shut up an' start diggin'."

Which we does, with our teeth all on edge, expectin' any second to feel our shovels gratin' on pore Splinter's bones. But we don't hit Splinter.

We don't hit nothin' but gravel an' rocks which soon git so solid we can't dig no more.

Puggy looks around, kinda numb-like. "He ain't here," gulps Puggy. "Ol' Splinter, he ain't here nohow. Ol' devil musta come an' carted him off whilst we was in town."

"Of course Splinter ain't here," says Shoo-fly. "He never was. Splinter Hicks stood at least six foot seven or eight inches in his socks. This so-called grave them Jethcoes dug for him wa'nt over five foot six long. How you gonna jam a guy like Splinter into a five foot six hole? You ain't."

All Puggy could do was stutter. "Buh-buh-but we saw 'em—"

"We never saw nothin'," cuts in Shoo-fly. "We heard things. We heard the yell that was supposed to be Splinter dyin', an' we heard 'em scratchin' this lil' ol' hole in the gravel that was to pass as Splinter's grave. But we didn't see Splinter die an' we didn't see 'em plant him. So the answer is he didn't, an' they didn't. An' that's what's got Bosco an' me so interested."

"Git back on yore broncs an' come along," growls Bosco. "We got places to go an' things to do."

IT'S plain that Puggy's thinkin' apparatus has plumb run off the trail an' I got to admit mine wasn't exactly as clear as spring water about that time. When a guy is murdered but not killed, an' when he's buried, but ain't—well, gents, you try an' figger it out. The answer had I an Puggy plumb licked to a frazzle.

Bosco an' Shoo-fly, they rides out ahead, with I an' Puggy follerin'. I can hear Puggy's teeth clackin' an' he keeps his head goin' round an' round like a billy-owl on a high fence post. He musta been expectin' a flock of ghosts to come flittin' around a bend any ol' time. Whichever wouldn't have surprised me none, either.

Bosco an' Shoo-fly, they keep rammin' deeper an' deeper down into Pleasant Valley, whilst I an' Puggy got no other out than to tag along. By this time she's plumb dark an' Puggy crowds his bronc close to mine.

"Whut's the answer, Ike?" mumbles Puggy. "You think ol' devil really carted Splinter off before we got there? An' whut we doin' rammin' around in these parts where we're liable to git feuded any blame second?"

I shakes my head. "Ain't got a single answer to anything, Puggy. I've quit tryin' to figger it. All we kin do is peg along behind Shoo-fly an' Bosco. One comfort is, if'n we git feuded, they'll git feuded, too."

"Serve 'em right," glowers Puggy. "Ain't got no better sense than they've showed so far, they oughta git feuded."

This here Pleasant Valley is kinda shaped like a arrow head. At the north end, nearest Cactus City, she's narrow an' pointed. At the lower end she spreads out, plenty wide. The Hicks, they headquarter over on the west edge, while the Jethcoes, they hole up on the east side. Whilst Wiggly Crick, the further it gits down the valley, the wigglier it gits, windin' an' lopin' here an' yonder until all the middle of the valley is a plumb wilderness of willer an' alder trees an' crick meadows runnin' every which way.

I heard tell of one jigger who got himself losted in that there jungle an' near starved to death before he got out. Whichever I an' Puggy are sure hopin' don't happen to us.

By'n bye Bosco pulls to a stop an' says, "This here is as good a place as any. This ain't far from Hideout Meadow and if there's any rinky-doo business goin' on, that's where things will happen. Loosen yore cinches an' settle down comfortable, boys, for she's liable to be a long wait."

It was. It was all night. It didn't make a lick of sense to I an' Puggy. Just why, I an' Puggy tries to figger, should we be layin' out all cold an' shivery down near this Hideout Meadow when we coulda been bunked up warm an' cozy in town, or even in our blankets at the camp we had where we been screenin' gravel?

It don't do us a lick of good tryin' to find the answer to this from Bosco or Shoo-fly. All they'll tell us is to shut up and keep quiet. Which irritates I an' Puggy considerable. 'Specially so when it's Shoo-fly actin' so dang uppity. Puggy, he scrooges over close to me an' whispers.

"That dang lil' bee-head of a Shoo-fly, he's gittin' too tight for his britches. Should I an' him come out of this loco business all in one piece, I'm gonna slap him to a peak an' knock the top off. Who does he think is sheriff of Cactus County, him or Bosco?"

I don't know the answer to that, either, so I don't say nothin', but doze off finally, with Puggy still mutterin' an' mumblin' to himself.

I WAKES up with somebody shakin' me. It's Bosco Bates. "Come alive!" he growls. "Come alive. Things is due to happen. Come alive, but stay put until I say different."

It's still plumb dark, an' cold with that just before dawn kind of cold. I hears Bosco off to one side, stirrin' Puggy awake. I hear somethin' else, which is cattle bein' drove an' bellerin' their objections. Them cows is comin' our way, seems like an' I stretch some of the stiffness outa me an' begin fumblin' around for my hoss, not honin' to be tromped to death in the dark by no herd of cattle.

Puggy he gits the same idee, but Bosco tells him to stay put, that them cows would cut across below where he was hid out. Which they does, sure enough, an' then seem to run into a fence or somethin' below an' off to our left, for they seems to herd up there an' do a lot of complainin' bellerin'.

Shoo-fly, kinda exultantlike, says, "Jest like you figgered, Bosco. They're holdin' them cow critters in Hideout Meadow. Come dawn, I bet we smells brandin' fire smoke."

Which shore enough turns out to be the truth, so help me. When dawn comes

along an' things light up sorta gray and misty, I gits a sniff of woodsmoke, which makes me think longin'-like of hot coffee an' bacon an' flapjacks.

Bosco growls, "All right, you jiggers. Time for action. Tighten up yore cinches an' make shore yore guns is loaded. Shoo-fly, you take Ike, cut around, an' come up on Hideout Meadow from the west. Puggy, you come with me. We sift in from the east. Shoo-fly, you an' Ike keep hid an' quiet an' let me do the talkin'. But if we find what I figger we're goin' to, an' them Hicks an' Jethcoes start gettin' whangy, why we give 'em so much feudin' they'll choke on it. Feud—heck! Them dang cow thieves!"

I ain't feelin' too comfortable bein' parted from Puggy. 'Cause Puggy is kinda substantial-like, an' cautious. Me, I like to be teamed up with a cautious man, for that kind of a jigger don't often git a feller man into trouble. But Shoo-fly, he's like a danged cricket, liable to give out a squeak an' jump most any old direction at any old time. Besides, while he's a lil', sawed off scrawny ol' goat, he's whangy as they come, gits his mad up instanter an' when he's mad would jest as soon as not crawl into a pickle keg with a grizzly bear. He ain't what you'd call a peace of mind partner to be teamed up with.

Bosco Bates says go with Shoo-fly, so I does. We rides a wide an' cautious circle with Shoo-fly leadin' an' me follerin' blind. How Shoo-fly finds his way through them willer an' alder thickets is beyond me. But he does, an' presently I an' him are around the west side of that there Hideout Meadow, where the cattle is doin' more bellerin' all the time an' with more woodsmoke smellin' up the air all the time.

Behind a big willer thicket, Shoo-fly reins in an' swings down. "We leaves our broncs here," he mutters. "Now foller me plenty quiet."

To which I do the best I can, but my heart's a-poundin' so loud seems it could be heard clear back in Cactus City. For of a sudden I'm plumb wide awake an' realizin' that the way things is shapin' up, lead can start flyin' any sweet second, which is a thing I ain't never got used to.

I an' Shoo-fly ends up crawlin' on our hands an' knees through the thickest willers you ever see. Sudden like, these willer bushes end an' right there in front of my nose is a four strand barb wire fence. An' t'other side there's cows millin' around an' men a-ridin' an' callin' back an' forth.

And then I gits the worst shock of all. One of these riders swings by so close I can't be mistaken, even if the light is still a mite dim. An' who do you think that jigger is? It's Splinter Hicks!

For a minute, me, Ike Ferris, I can't think, I can't breathe, I can't even jump an' run, though I'd shore have liked to. I ask you, how'd you like to have a jigger who'd been killed an' buried, ride right by in front of yore eyes? What would you do?

Well, gents, before I can do anything, booming in across that meadow comes the voice of Bosco Bates.

"This is Bosco Bates. This is the law. You Hicks an' Jethcoes is all under arrest for cow stealin'. Don't try any tricks or you get it where it hurts most!"

For a second or two it seems that even them cows stop bellerin'. Then some wild yellin' starts an' things get brisk—fast!

SOME shootin' starts, but me, I can't see nothin' but cows millin' round an' round, so I hold my fire. Shoo-fly likewise. Then here comes a rider, lickety-larrup, right through them cows an' aimin' for the fence right over I an' Shoo-fly. We don't have time to shoot before that rider gigs his bronc hard an' puts him to the jump at the fence.

The bronc makes a fair try, but hooks a front hoof on the top wire, turns plumb over an' comes down with a whop that shakes the earth. Somehow the rider falls free an' gits up a-runnin'. I gets one look an' see that it's Rags Jethcoe, who is a mean bird, any way you takes him. So I spraggle after him, catch up an' comb his hair with the barrel of my rifle.

Rags, he grunts an' folds up an' I turn back to be ready for the next one. I see Shoo-fly squirm between the wire of that fence an' sprint out into the meadow, yellin' like a Comanche. Now a man with better sense than I got mighta stayed put, but this thing has kinda got holt of me now, so I peg it after Shoo-fly, liftin' my own war whoop.

How I an' Shoo-fly keeps from bein' tromped to death by them wild millin' cattle, I'll never know. I thought I was goin' to be, four or five times, but each time I manages to dodge clear. Out in front there's still some shootin' goin' on, with Bosco yellin' for everybody to surrender, that they was under arrest.

I git me several glimpses of hombres

racin' back an' forth on broncs, but I can't fairly draw a good bead on any of 'em, for there's allus them cussed cattle rammin' around me. Besides, I couldn't be rightly sure that I wouldn't be drillin' a .30-30 at mebbe Bosco or Puggy.

I'm beginnin' to worry about Puggy. Him an' me been partners a plenty long time, an' I think a lot of the ol' boy. I'm worryin' that mebbe he's stopped a slug, or been tromped by them cows.

Then of a sudden I busts into the clear —an' I see Puggy. An' is he goin' to town!

Puggy's like that. Takes quite some time for him to catch fire, but when he does, he shore burns with a white hot light. Puggy's chasin' Splinter Hicks. Splinter, he's done lost his bronc somewhere, an' now he's afoot an' runnin' like all git out. Right behind him prances Puggy.

"Mebbe you're a ghost," whoops Puggy. "Mebbe ol' devil did shuck you outa that grave an' send you back to steal cattle. Jest the same, when I git my hands on you, Splinter Hicks—!"

Splinter, he's split plumb high up the middle an' them long laigs of his'n are jest a blur, he's travelin' that fast. But Puggy is a man with a mission an' he closes in. He takes off with a big jump an' lands plumb straddle of Splinter's neck. Down they go in a wild tangled heap, with Splinter's laigs an' arms swinging around like windmills.

But before I could get to 'em, it's Puggy who's ended up on top an' he's got both fists swingin'. Purty soon Puggy stops swingin' an' there's old Splinter, cold as a goose. Puggy looks up at me an' pants, "I nailed him, Ike. I nailed this ol' ghost. But me, I allus figgered ghosts was made up of fog an' bed sheets. This'n is plumb solid an' can punch like heck." Sayin' which, Puggy fingers his nose plumb tender like, for it's beginnin' to swell an' leak crimson.

About then I realizes that things have quieted down. The cows are still millin' an' bellerin', but the shootin' has stopped an' over yonder Bosco Bates and Shoo-fly Davis is linin' up some mighty scared and shaky lookin' Jethcoes an' Hicks'. All except Turk Jethcoe, who is layin' on the ground, groanin', leakin' blood from a bullet hole in his shoulder.

I an' Puggy lugs Splinter Hicks over an' lays him down by Turk.

"He ain't dead, is he?" growls Bosco Bates.

"Nope," says Puggy. "Not dead. But he's shore one cooled off ghost. Bet he wishes ol' devil had let him stay buried."

"Don't be so cussed stupid," jeers Shoo-fly. "Splinter never was scragged, an' he never was buried. There never was any real feud at all between the Hicks an' the Jethcoes. They jest put on that feud talk to scare folks outa moochin' around Pleasant Valley. An' they tried to run I an' you an' Ike out by stagin' a fake killin' of Splinter. That was all jest foam on the lemon pie, you might say."

"Zat so, wise guy," come back Puggy. "Mebbe you kin tell me why they was fakin' their feudin'—if they was fakin'?"

"Sure can," says Shoo-fly. "Take a look at the brands on them cows. The Seven Up an' Down, which is a brand from over on the Big Windy range. The Hicks an' the Jethcoes rustled them cows an' shagged 'em into this meadow, which they'd fence on the sly. They was beginnin' to blot them Seven Up an' Down brands to the Hicks Broad H Diamond, an' the Jethcoes' J 4 Connected, which is easy done, if you got half an eye to see with."

Me, I begin to see a glimmerin' of light by this time, but Puggy, he's still a mite stubborn. "I don't see—"

"You don't need to see," cuts in Bosco. "Shoo-fly's got the picture plumb correct. All this feud business was jest a stall to keep folks outa Pleasant Valley while the Hicks an' Jethcoes stole cattle an' blotted to their irons. So quit jawin' an' help me git these hombres tied up an' headin' out for my jail house in Cactus City."

Which we does, with I headin' out to bring in Rags Jethcoe from over past the fence.

Late that afternoon I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly wake up. We're at our gravel screenin' camp again an' here comes ol' High Pockets MaGee with his wagon after another load. Pleasant Valley is plumb pleasant an' peaceful. Yonder is the spunk hole which I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly had wallered in, in mortal fear of our lives. An' it ain't smellin' a mite better than it did before.

Shoo-fly cusses softlike. "Makes me mad every time I think how we burrowed around in that spunk hole, all because of a fake feud."

"Hum!" grunts Puggy. "Me, too. Well, fake feud or no fake feud, we shore busted her wide open. Which is some satisfaction.

(Concluded on page 102)

SHADOW OF THE DEVIL

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

The feeling grew on Pete like the devil was watching him

In the frozen expanse of the Canadian wilds, a struggle for survival has strange results for both man and beast!

IT WAS the twenty-seventh day of the long cold, during which the temperature had never once crept above the twenty below zero mark, even at midday. Rarely was there sight of the sun, a cold red ball remote in a steely sky, with dancing sun-dogs marking attendance like harbingers of doom. During those four weeks there had been three feet of fresh snow added to the already thick blanket across the earth, and now a new plague had been added to the cold—that of famine.

In testimony of it, the always lean body of Shadow, the weasel, was more lean and gaunt than it had ever been, and hunger, coupled with the cold, drove him now on an endless, desperate quest for food. Just as it was driving all other creatures of the frozen wilderness, from the least to the greatest, save only those who, like the bears, were deep sunk in hibernation.

The prolonged period of strain was hav-

ing other effects, too. One was to render most hunger-gaunted animals less cunning, so that the trapper, Pete LaRue, was reaping a rich harvest of furs, his meat baits being eagerly taken. Shadow had come upon captive animals frozen stiff, in the big-jawed steel traps and therefore of scant interest to his hot-blood thirst.

Another result was that new and savage strangers had been driven to this hunting ground. Within the past hour Shadow had encountered the tracks of a creature new to him. Something about those very tracks in the snow had caused his hackles to rise in a gesture of hate and repugnance, though he had no idea what manner of thing this might be.

Shadow paused now, a long sinuous shape, weighing less than a pound, but powerful as coiled steel springs, and with a hard, steely courage. He was white as the snow itself, save for the black tip of his tail and his black, beady eyes. He had neither seen nor heard anything, but some sense warned him that a hostile presence lurked close at hand. Whether it was victim or enemy, something to make a meal of or preparing to make a meal of him, he could not be sure.

The next instant the question was resolved as it struck, a great horned owl swooping out of the skies and striking with powerful talons. They closed on him before he could back or escape, and the next instant Shadow was being lifted, borne into the air.

FOR fifty feet the horned terror flew in savage elation, heading for a tree stump where he might alight and tear his prey to shreds with beak and powerful talons. Ordinarily, the winged hunter had little taste for weasels, which are stringy and bitter of flesh. But the cold and all-prevailing hunger had gripped the great bird as it had all other living flesh, and the weasel would sustain life.

It appeared to be just another in the endless succession of tragedies which go to make up the pattern of the wild. Then abruptly it was reversed. Squirming desperately, heedless of those iron claws which gripped so painfully, Shadow stretched his long neck forward and upward, and sank his pointed teeth deep among the downy cluster of breast feathers. The next instant the owl's claws tightened involuntarily, but it was too late.

The sharp snout of the weasel had penetrated, the thirsty teeth had torn into a vein, and now it was Shadow who was feasting—drinking the life-blood of his captor.

Frantically the great claws loosed their hold, slashed upward and out again, as the owl strove to free itself of his plague, to kick the weasel loose. It was of no use. Shadow clung fast now, deep among the feathers, his teeth clamped remorselessly, and with every wing-beat the great owl grew weaker. It climbed a little higher, wavered, sank slowly, then tumbled in a senseless, dying heap of feathers to the snow.

As it hit, not far from a snow-hung clump of spruce, something erupted from the trees and was on it in a single leap, a jump the more incredible because of the short legs and low-hung body of the beast. But in proportion to its size, this animal, like Shadow himself, was incredibly powerful. Indeed, though Shadow had no way of knowing it, here was another creature of his own clan.

Even had he guessed it, Shadow would not have been interested. For most of the year he had no interest in any living creature save himself, except for food. Now, not seeing the attack, he none the less felt the impact of it, and with swift instinct, wriggled deep into the soft snow, below the dead owl. A few moments later he emerged several feet away.

It took a remarkable sense of smell for the other animal to detect him as he emerged, for he was practically invisible. But without an instant's hesitation it lashed at him with a paw, with long, formidably curved claws.

Snarling in his throat, completely defiant, Shadow twisted aside and was gone in the snow, elusive as his name. His antagonist, he saw, resembled a small brown bear, and there clung to it a sharp musky odor, highly unpleasant. Though with no way of knowing, Shadow sensed that he had encountered the most dread creature of all the northern wilds, the creature which the Indians so aptly called the devil.

Rage was flaring redly in Shadow's beady little eyes as he retreated. Not that he cared greatly about the owl—now. It was only a mass of feathers and stringy meat, sucked dry of blood. But it had been his prey, and he resented having it snatched from him. Hate grew in him against this big bully.

Still, it had been a fairly satisfying

meal, and his hurts, in the double encounter, had been superficial. For the lean, hard body of the weasel would take a good deal of punishment without much ill-effect.

He stood for a moment, safe-hidden among the snowy branches of the trees, to watch the wolverine lope away, then went on about his own business—the business of hunting, of questing ceaselessly for prey. This was partly instinct, partly the crying need of a body starved and squeezed by the cold. To hunt and to kill was, with Shadow, a natural way of life. He had been made to do just that.

An hour later, he caught the faint warm scent of a mouse. Mice had been a natural and plentiful prey, some weeks before, but of late they had become rare, remaining most of the time in their hidden tunnels deep beneath the snow. This one had ventured up, not long before, for a look at the forgotten world.

Here was where it had tunneled beneath the snow. Nearly as lean and small of body as the mouse, Shadow followed that tunnel swiftly, his nose avid with the freshening scent. He heard a terrified squeak, and his jaws drooled. Then, with the prey just ahead, something happened again.

This time it was a fox, likewise desperate for meat, however small, digging frantically through the snow. The thrusting paw all but slapped Shadow on the nose, and he reared up with a shrill scream of blood-curdling defiance. But by then the mouse was gone, lost to both of them.

Disconcerted for just a moment by Shadow's scream that was chilling even to a hardened hunter, the fox hesitated then lunged at him. There was just time enough for Shadow to lose himself in the white waste again.

Disgruntled, his temper even more uncertain than usual, Shadow continued his cruising. The blood of the owl had helped, but the effect was already wearing off. He must have food. A few weeks before there had been rabbits everywhere—the big snowshoe rabbits, hugely satisfying as a meal. Now they, too, were gone.

A faint odor of meat came to his nostrils, and Shadow followed it. Here it was, something in the snow, a hard, forzen pellet of flesh. Elk, but Shadow was not interested. He was not yet close enough to starvation to care about such unappetizing fare. Fresh hot blood was what he craved.

And now a new, stronger, and decidedly more unpleasant odor permeated the atmosphere, and he retreated, snarling deep in his throat. From a safe distance he saw the wolverine find the same pellet of meat, sniff at it, and spurn it as he had done, though for a vastly different reason.

For here was a creature with cunning to make even the fox or the wolf seem stupid. Flesh—any sort of flesh, new or old, putrid or otherwise—it made little difference to the wolverine in ordinary circumstances, and still less now. These frozen pellets of meat would quickly thaw in the stomach.

YET the animal did not touch them. For it had sensed, by some degree of smell far beyond the power of Shadow's nose, that this meat contained poison. And it was not to be so easily duped.

Snarling and grunting in double rage, partly at the discovery of poison, partly at the loss of food, the wolverine plunged ahead with a purposeful gait. And here, though Shadow had no means of guessing it, was the outcropping of a feud far more desperate than even his own with this interloping devil.

The wolverine had been in this section of country now for more than a week. Pete LaRue had known of its presence for almost that long. He had been unpleasantly apprised of it by the discovery of several empty traps as he cruised his trap lines. One had held a marten—a rich prize. Another had held, as the few remaining hairs told, an even richer prize—a rare silver fox.

Both had been eaten by the wolverine; the traps themselves were bent and twisted. It required a fiendish creature with incredible strength to do this, but Pete LaRue, though this was his first encounter with the devil of the wilds, was not surprised. Other, older trappers had told him what a wolverine could do.

He knew, for instance, that though weighing only twenty-five or thirty pounds, wolverines had been known to kill bear or moose, and that a bear or a lynx, with new-killed prey, would retreat rather than contest it with a wolverine. And the things that such a baleful creature could do even to man, to his trap line, were the real basis for the Indian's belief that in the shaggy hide there truely dwelt the devil himself.

The next few days had increased the trapper's certainty that this was a fight to the finish. It was either kill the creature or face stark ruin. It had traced his whole trap line, was destroying sets and traps and captured animals. Anything too large to eat, it fouled, so that no other animal, though starving, would go near it.

This was desperate. Back in Montreal was a rosy-cheeked lass who was to be Pete's bride in the spring. He had worked hard, this winter, so that he might bring riches to pour into her lap. All had been highly promising—until the coming of the wolverine.

So far, Pete's most desperate efforts to destroy it had been fruitless. Once he had stalked it, had shot at it, the bullet scraping the skin of its neck, stinging, drawing blood. Several times he had set traps, using all his skill, only to have them dug up, exposed, twisted and ruined, as if in mockery.

He had been lucky enough to kill an elk and had prepared poison baits, but without effect. Now, something like panic was beginning to grip him. The wolverine was becoming bolder, more ruthless, and it seemed able to out-think, to out-trick him, at every turn.

He had neglected his trap lines for a few days, partly because they were now yielding him nothing. Which was one reason why the wolverine was again plagued by hunger.

Knowing nothing of this, but burning with anger in his own private feud, Shadow loped ahead. It had snowed again the night before, and here the snow was all smooth and unbroken. A clump of brush reared, and the inviting scent of flesh came to his nostrils, frozen though he knew it must be. Shadow turned that way, and again, out from that clump of brush, the lurking wolverine plunged at him.

With most animals, he could not have missed. But Shadow was like his name, and he eluded those clutching paws and gaping jaws in a sidewise leap of his own, with doubly surprising results. As he landed, plummeting through the soft snow, the heavy jaws of a big trap clicked shut just above him.

Here, though Shadow had no way of knowing it, he was helping his enemy. Pete LaRue had worked for a long time, in the falling snow, the evening before, to fix this set, in the hope that the new snow would hide all human or trap scent and sign, and fool the wolverine. And it might have done so, had not Shadow blundered into the trap. Realization of how nearly he had come to being fooled increased the wolverine's rage.

Luck was with Shadow, however. The jaws closed just above him, and he made his escape, while the devil creature took out his rage on the trap, which he knew was now harmless. Then, having found and devoured the bait, he began his cruising afresh.

Weary, the hunger gnawing at the pit of his stomach, Shadow curled up in a stump and slept. But he was early on the prowl the next day, more desperate than ever for food. And here, it seemed to him, luck was going to be with him at last.

UP AHEAD, he saw, was fresh, quivering flesh—nothing less than a deer, pulled down by a gaunt timber wolf. It had only that moment made the kill, one lone, huge beast, and Shadow, gauging his chances, decided that he could soon slip in through the deep snow, creep up on the off side, and drink his fill unobserved, while the wolf tore at the other side of its prey.

Quivering with anticipation, he began his advance, then stopped with a snarl of frustrated rage. For here, as it seemed he did everywhere, came the wolverine. The timber wolf was several times bigger, and although a desperate antagonist at any time, it was doubly so now that it was about to begin its feast. But the wolverine came on without pause or apparent doubt as to the outcome. Grunting and growling, it charged.

For a moment, snarling, the wolf stood its ground. But at the last moment it retreated in impotent rage.

Like the wolf, Shadow was forced to stand off at a safe distance and watch the devil-creature gorge. When he tried advancing, the wolverine sprang at him, with a personal animus in the attack. Finally, fed full, it fouled the remaining meat.

Desperation was in Pete LaRue as well. Discovery of his latest set, and what had happened to it, convinced him that he could not trap the wolverine by any ordinary method. Not with a steel trap, certainly. Yet this contest had to be resolved, and soon. He had a feeling that it was now a question of survival—either him or the devil.

There was one trap which might work. The old-fashioned Indian deadfall. It required a lot of hard work, but it ought to fool even a wolverine. Having selected his site in advance, Pete set to work, hanging his snowshoes from the limb of a tree, keeping his rifle close at hand. While he worked, he stopped often, glancing nervously about. The feeling grew on him that the devil was watching him, mocking his efforts.

None the less, the trapper kept on, grimly. He needed a heavier fall log, now, and he went off a hundred paces to get it, leaving his rifle. When he returned, dragging the log, he saw that something had happened.

His rifle was gone. It had been dragged away and was lost somewhere in the deep snow. The tracks told plainly enough who had done it. Here was cunning and savagery of a high order, and the darkly frowning wilderness made the trapper shiver.

Gripping the axe tightly, he looked about. It would be folly, he realized, to finish the deadfall. The wily devil would never be caught in it now. The thing was to get back to his cabin, where he had another rifle. For a wolverine, especially such a knowing creature as this one, would attack a man.

He turned to get his snowshoes, then swore in awe and apprehension. They too, had been dragged down, the buckskin lacings torn to shreds by claws and teeth.

Pete LaRue shivered. His cabin was miles away, the snow was deep, the cold bitter. Without snowshoes, it would take hours to get there. He had a feeling that this was a showdown. If he didn't hurry, the creature would beat him to it, even there.

The trapper had been raised in the bush. He was a superstitious man, as are nearly all who live much alone and close to nature. Perhaps it was a resurgence of ancient, almost forgotten instinct now. Certain it is that his hunch was right. For the *carcajo,* with that same wild cunning, had headed now for the trapper's cabin, of which it had known for several days. And seemingly with the same idea of showdown, of complete destruction, in mind.

It knew, as did Pete LaRue, that this was a finish fight between them. Only one could survive. And with that cunning which had amazed and terrified generations of Indians, it knew that if the nest was destroyed, here in dead of winter, a man-creature could not long survive.

Shadow, steadily on the prowl, desperate with need of food, finding nothing, had spent the same time in heading, purely by chance, toward the snow-covered cabin. He was not more than a hundred paces away from it when he saw his enemy appear, and watched, partly through hate, partly in curiosity.

Nothing ever amazed Shadow. His was a forthright, self-centered, utterly savage nature. But even he was a little surprised at the wolverine's present tactics. It circled the cabin, once. No smoke arose from the pipe now, for it had been long hours since Pete LaRue had been here.

The stout door was firmly fastened. But, choosing the corner of the cabin where the snow lay piled clear to the eaves, the wolverine began to dig. Here was cunning added to instinct. For here, deep under the snow and close to where the stove stood inside the cabin, heat had worked its way down so that the ground, at this one single spot, was no longer frozen solidly.

With its long, powerful claws, the wolverine dug, and presently came up, not inside the main room of the cabin, which had a rough board floor, but just beyond the partition which separated it from the second, rougher room. In this colder, unheated room, there was no floor, nor any opening, save the door leading into the other room.

In here was the season's take of furs. Stacks of fine peltries, hanging from the beam or piled on shelves and along the walls. The wolverine's eyes gleamed. It would destroy and befoul everything here in the cabin before leaving, but not yet.

The door stood ajar, and it moved through it, into the still warm room where Pete LaRue lived when he was at home.

As it did so, Shadow popped his head up through the newly-dug hole, into the store room.

Here, he knew shrewdly, would be food. And what better than to make use of his enemy's efforts to get it? A quick look around showed Shadow that the dry pelts were of no interest. From the other room came a pleasant feeling of warmth, a warm smell of fresh, bloody meat. He slid through the door.

INSIDE, completely confident that it had plenty of time, the wolverine, showing no fear, was looking around be-

fore beginning his task of destruction. Although he had gorged on fresh deer meat, earlier in the day, the cold and his efforts were beginning to give him a pleasant sense of hunger again. And here was the wherewithal to satisfy it.

The day before, the trapper had had a little luck, finding a dead lynx in a trap untouched by the wolverine. Since it was frozen stiff, he had hung it in this room to thaw, before skinning it. Now it was nearly thawed, and a few drops of blood had dripped to the floor below.

In a corner of the room, hung on antlers, was the trapper's other rifle. The wolverine eyed it, knowing that it must be destroyed. He glanced without much curiosity at other things—the stove, still exuding a little warmth, the table, bunk, chair and other objects. They were strong with man-scent, but he knew that they were harmless.

The smell of blood, only a few drops of it, made Shadow frantic. Like his name, he slipped across the floor, lapped up the blood on the floor almost like a cat. It was just enough to whet his appetite. He sprang lightly, with increasing boldness, onto the table. From that, a leap should carry him to the haunches of the lynx, where he could burrow into blood.

In his hunger, he had almost forgotten his fear of the wolverine. Not that it was Shadow's habit to hold much fear of any creature that walked, however big. That much he had in common with this ugly cousin of his. But now the wolverine saw him, contrasted sharply against the brown table, and spurred by hate and greed, growled savagely and sprang at him.

The speed of this devil-creature was something to match the weasel's. Seldom had Shadow seen anything quite like it. The sidewise leap, the slashing jaws, brought momentary panic to him. He knew that he had been over-bold, that he had better get out of there, and fast.

A jump carried him off the table, onto the bunk, but the wolverine was close after him. Wriggling in the straw and blankets, Shadow found momentary safety, but the covering was savagely ripped asunder, and he leaped frantically, landing on the chair.

Death was not behind him. He jumped again, this time for the precarious safety of a shelf higher up, and as his feet clawed for a hold, gaping jaws were just behind him.

Something hindered Shadow, slipping under his paws and almost causing him to lose his hold and fall back. Something familiar, meat-balls, such as Shadow had found in the snow. The difference was that these were not frozen. But they held no interest for him now.

His wildly clawing feet kicked three or four of them from the shelf. One of them fell straight into the slavering jaws opening for him, was gulped down instinctively before the wolverine even realized what it was.

Then, in swift reaction, with that same invincible cunning, the devil recognized it. Even as it was going down, his super-keen nose caught the faint, intangible scent of poison. Frantically he clawed at his mouth, attempting to disgorge it, but already it had been swallowed.

SHADOW was forgotten. Here was death, and the wolverine knew it. Death meted out, however unwittingly, by this tiny enemy. The wolverine's instinct now was to get out into the open air, and he turned, plunged back outdoors again.

Half a mile from the cabin Pete LaRue, returning, saw it in its last dying throes. Still not quite believing, not understanding, he went on and let himself in. A look told most of the story, all except why the wily wolverine had taken poisoned meat, after refusing it before, and with other fresh meat available.

Then he saw Shadow, deep within the fur of the hanging lynx, still feasting, and noticed the claw-scratches on the shelf, the dropped pellets on the floor. Slow understanding came to him, and Pete LaRue chuckled.

"Go right ahead and help yourself and don't worry about me," he said. "Looks like a case of David and Goliath, and I was always for the under-dog, 'specially when he's on my side!"

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

Fiction and features by HASCAL GILES, JOE ARCHIBALD, L. P. HOLMES, ALLAN K. ECHOLS, FOGHORN CLANCY, JOHN BLACK and others!

APACHE SOUVENIR

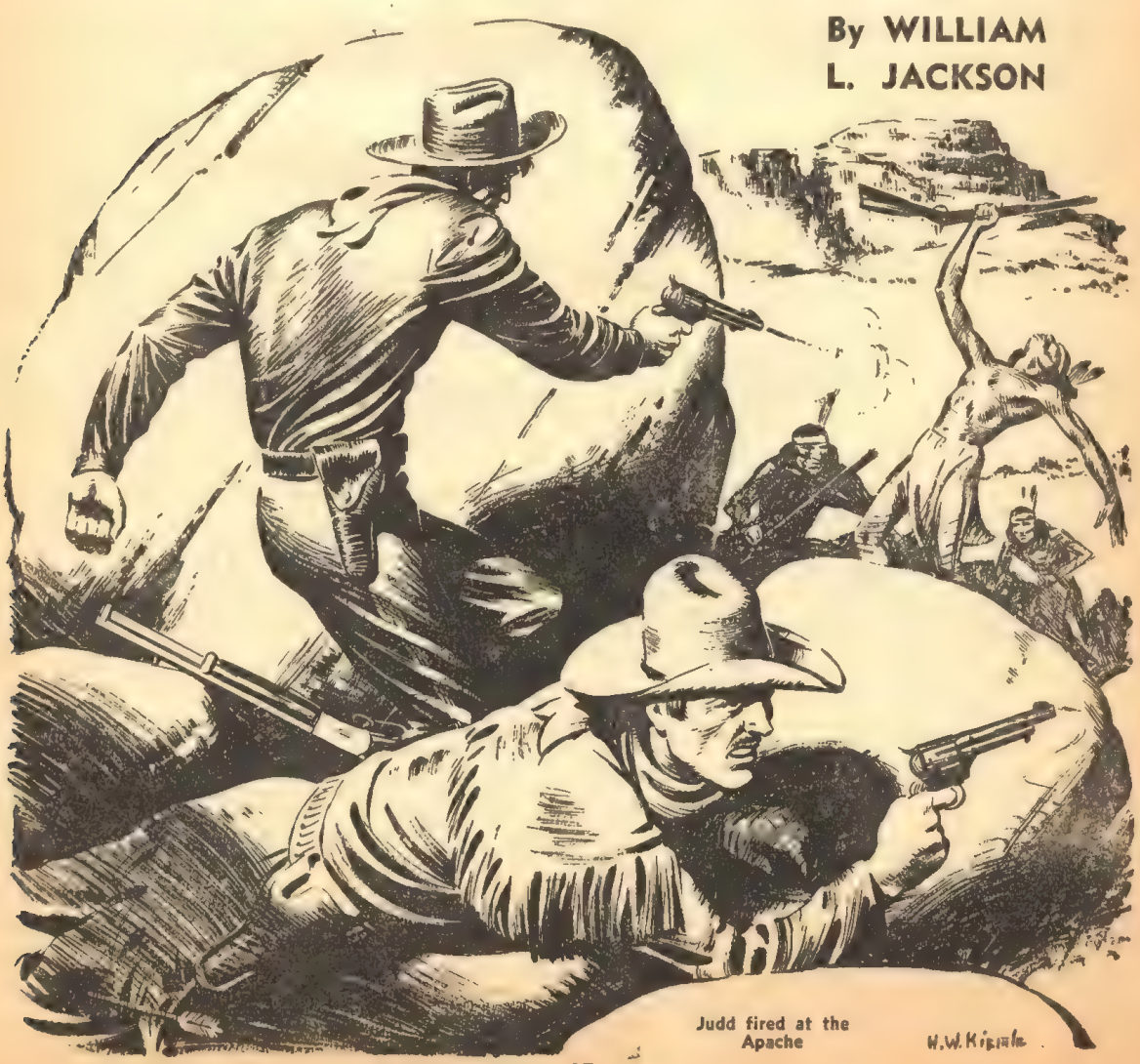
Army Scout Judd Stockton must choose between torture and death for himself—or his friend!

By WILLIAM L. JACKSON

JUDD STOCKTON'S lips were parched and his tongue was swollen in his mouth. The desert sun was a flaming patch of brilliance overhead and the cup of rocks Judd was lying in caught the scorching rays and reflected them over his body in stifling waves. Sudden gusts of wind raised by cross currents in the rock-bound hills washed over the rocks, but they were hot and dry, and only added to the boiling heat.

His army carbine was propped level between two rocks which formed a sort of natural gun slit, and Judd reached up to touch it with his hand. The metal burned his fingers. The weapon was as hot as a rapidly fired weapon would be. A dry chuckle rose in Judd's throat. His carbine hadn't been fired for hours. Funny, he thought, how useless a machined piece of steel and wood like that weapon becomes when there is no longer anything to put into the chamber; just as useless as a soldier with no weapon.

Rolling over onto his side and getting



Judd fired at the Apache

more dirt on the already grimed yellow stripe on his trousers, Judd looked at the other man lying with him in the rocks.

The man was Al Lister, a civilian scout for the Cavalry. Al was half sitting up against a rock, gazing out over the broken desert which ran up to the small, sharp rise they were on. Without looking down he was twisting the Apache arrow in his thigh. That arrow had rapidly grown to be an obsession with Lister. Getting it out would not lessen his pain a great deal, but he had been working it around in the wound since they had reached the rocks. It was as if the Apaches had a claim on him while the arrow was in his flesh, and he was determined to remove it.

Judd scratched absently at the light blond beard stubble on his chin for lack of anything better to do. "See anything, Al?"

Al shifted his weight a bit and grunted. "Naw. But they're out there. When we do see 'em it'll only be for a little while."

NODDING, Judd let his eyes move with Al's and studied the surrounding brush and rock. He knew what Al meant. When they saw the Apaches it would only be for a little while because the Indians would then see them, and death would be theirs.

Apaches were to be seen in the rocks, twisted and still in the sun, killed by bullets from Judd or Al's gun. But there were also unseen, angry Apaches who were a long way from being dead. The thirty or more war ponies at the edge of the long rock formation gave their number. The riders of those half-wild bumblings were somewhere in the rocks, drawing closer every moment, each one a sliding, stalking two legged bundle of quick death.

Or so Judd Stockton and Al Lister tried to imply by their limited conversation. They both knew that in reality those savages represented the most horrible drawn out death that could be devised. After taking a loss of at least fifteen braves that afternoon the Indians would not give these two whites a quick death. Theirs would be the kind of death dealt out near a fire surrounded by frenzied, wildly leaping savages. The Apaches would want a little sport out of their victims before they silenced their screams with a stroke of the knife.

The steadily rising heat waves among the rocks blurred Judd's vision and he closed his eyes, letting his mind go back to the action that had ended in this death destined Indian trap.

STOCKTON and Al had been sent on patrol that morning by Major Alson, a half day before the troop left the fort. Both men had acted as scouts for the outfit before, through many long, drawn out campaigns and had had a sort of friendly rivalry. It was the first time they had ever gone out together.

The morning patrol was just another slow, boring ride through the desert's heat and dryness, and when there was no particular need for observation Judd studied Al Lister. Al was a man born to this demanding and tiring life. His eyes were a steady gray and were crinkled around the corners from too much sun squinting. His nose, once straight and strong, had been broken twice high on the bridge, giving him a tough, belligerent look. His wide, firm lipped mouth smiled easily over even white teeth and he laughed with a ready humor.

None of the things he had seen or done in Indian campaigns had soured him. When he looked about him at the desert it seemed to Judd that he was taking as much from the flats and hills as they took from him.

He would never forget the expression which crossed Lister's face when the moistureless wind brought them the odors of recently burned wood and canvas. Al had raised his head and sniffed like an animal.

"Funny," he said, almost to himself. "I thought they'd get farther."

Judd and Al found the wagon and the victims at a spot where the trail ran through a natural rock basin, a perfect spot for an ambush. The party had consisted of a man, his wife and their small son. They had been in too much of a hurry to wait until the Army patrol could escort them through the passes. They weren't in a hurry when Judd and Al found them.

After examining the ground about the scene of the ambush, Judd and Al found that the wagon had been stopped by a party of about fifty braves. They noted the direction of the tracks, then began the distasteful chore of burying the

bodies. Stockton and Lister figured that the war party wouldn't linger so close to the burnt-out wagon. But they were wrong in their prediction. The braves must have been watching them approach, alone, across the desert, for the rocks were suddenly alive with leaping, whooping Indians.

Judd's carbine and Al's smooth marksmanship with his .45 took a terrific toll from the ranks of the savages while they moved to their horses, but the Indians were rapidly closing in to bottle up the Army scouts. There was a pass through which the two had to ride to escape, and Judd knelt calmly beside his horse and broke up the redskin concentration with his carbine fire while Al rode out.

Then Al did the same for him and they were in the open. The Apaches gave them a running battle for a short distance, but were no match for the long range of the carbine. Both men were low on ammunition, and had heaved sighs of relief and grinned at each other as they widened the distance.

Then, when they were almost safe, Al's pony began to stagger. Only then did they notice the arrow which the beast had caught just in front of its right flank. Another two hundred yards and the pony folded and could not be brought to its feet. Al urged Judd to go on alone, but the cavalry man took him up behind his saddle and they rode double with the Apaches in hot pursuit.

The cavalry sorrel could not outdistance the fleet Indian ponies while carrying a double load, and the Indians overtook them. Judd's horse was killed at the foot of the hill they were now on —he was there now, bloating in the sun —and Al caught the arrow in his leg on the upward climb. Judd barely made it to the rock pocket atop the hill, firing with one hand and aiding Al with the other.

When they fell behind the rocks the braves were practically upon them, screaming in wild anticipation, and the battle waged hot and furious for a few moments. Judd had emptied his carbine and was firing with his cavalry pistol when the line of attackers broke and fled down the rocky hill. Al could not fire any more; his .45 clicked on a wasted shell and his belt was empty. He looked questioningly at Judd, and for answer Judd twirled the empty cylinder of his pistol and shrugged. They had dropped behind the rocks then, to wait helplessly and hope that the cavalry would catch up with them sooner than expected.

AL HAD the arrow in his leg and Judd's sleeve was torn and bloody above his chevrons. An arrow had glanced off his arm there, tearing a swath in the flesh as deep as the bone.

Judd moved his arm and felt the pain strike him in great, throbbing blows. He tightened his lips against his teeth and suppressed a groan. He knew that his pain could be nothing when compared with the agony Lister must be in. Looking at Lister he knew that he saw a brave man. The scout's face was calm as he scrutinized the rocks which held the advancing Apaches; the lines in his face, the firmness of his lips across his teeth, and the dull look far back in his eyes told the story.

There had been no whimper of pain from him, and when Judd tried to remove the arrow and failed Lister had grinned weakly and fell to twisting the shaft back and forth himself. Under a doctor's hands that action would be painful. Judd knew what it must feel like here with dirt grinding into the flesh and the sun to cook it like so much meat.

Watching Lister's face, Judd knew that it was only a matter of time, but the scout was not asking for sympathy or complaining. And Judd knew that Lister couldn't get up and run. Judd would be able to run and perhaps die quickly by catching an arrow, but Al would only be able to sit there and wait for the savages to surround him and drag him off.

Trying to forget the beating pain in his arm Judd grinned inwardly and felt of a small lump in his shirt pocket. He had lied to Lister. The small lump was one round of ammunition for his pistol. Before each patrol he always placed one round in that pocket as a precautionary measure. The death from that small piece of lead was much easier and cleaner than death at the hands of the Apaches. Judd had seen too many victims of that kind of treatment to want to die that way. He wanted to go out quick, like a blown candle, not in the screaming agony which lasted until the Indians tired of their game.

That bullet had been saved for himself, but after lying there in the rocks with Lister Judd knew that it was now

for Al. Lister had gone through enough pain with his unattended leg. He had tried to mask the pain and seem comfortable while they waited, but Judd had seen through the mask.

It would have been different if the man had been a coward, but Lister had grit. He'd be the kind the Indians might play with for days, and they would like nothing better than to get their hands on the well known scout. It would be much better, Judd had decided, if Lister could disappoint the Apaches.

Making sure that Al's gaze was fastened on the rocks, Judd rolled over slowly, shielding the pistol from Al's sight while he slipped the one cartridge from his pocket and shoved it into the cylinder. As he worked he heard the clicking of Al's forty-five behind him and imagined the expression on Al's face as he toyed with the empty gun and wished for ammunition. Finished, Judd watched Al as closely as he would have if he were stealing from the man and moved across the ground toward him. Al's gun was now lying beside him and he was still tensely watching the rocks.

Cautious in his every move, Judd dragged himself nearer Al. He watched Al's face and felt with one hand for the gun on the ground. Finding it he drew it slowly to his side, then reached out with his own loaded weapon and replaced Al's empty one with it. Al's eyes widened suddenly and then narrowed. He reached behind him toward the pistol.

"I saw one of the devils, Judd," he said quietly. "About fifty feet out there on the left. Not long now." His hand closed on Judd's gun and his face showed mild surprise. "Yuh got my gun, didn't you, Judd?"

Judd tried to keep his voice from sounding strained. "Yeah," he answered, "but one's as good as the other, ain't it?" He wasn't quite ready to tell Al to use the one slug in the weapon, though he could feel the words gathering in his throat.

Both men lay quietly and Judd, too fastened his gaze on the rocks. He saw another Apache leave a rock stealthily and drop his sweating, gaudily painted body behind another, closer comrade. Then the cavalry man saw another, and another Indian, so close that he could see their sharp visaged faces. The rocks were crawling with them, and they were all within fifty feet now.

The next seconds dragged as Judd tried to form words to tell Al of the shell in his pistol. Judd felt everything acutely. The sun, the pain in his arm, the irritating small stones beneath him, the weight of the boots on his feet, the heat of the gun clutched in his hand. He was living everything of importance in his life over again and knew that Al was doing the same. His heart grew heavy as he thought of the bugle which would blow over them when the troops found their bodies. It was funny, he thought, how worthless and yet how dear a man's life becomes when he is about to lose it.

HE THOUGHT of telling Al of the easy way out he held in his hand and something clear and bell-like in the distance shoved gently at the rear of his mind to interrupt his thoughts. It was something he should recognize, he knew, and yet it was not penetrating his memory. The sound came again and he almost jumped to his feet. It was the piercing sound of a cavalry trumpet!

Judd raised his head above the level of the rocks and looked toward the sound. And there they were, breaking over the ridge in a long line, guidons fluttering in the breeze and sabers catching the sun and throwing it again into the sky. Judd wanted to cry in joy and gratitude, but no sound would come from his dry throat. Al looked at him and said simply, "They're early."

The Apaches were breaking up in the rocks about them and fleeing from this new menace. Judd felt his body sag. He knew that he should jump to his feet and yell or cry, but he couldn't move. He simply hugged the ground and let the weariness overcome him.

"Look at those devils run, Judd," Al said. "What I'd give for a round now!"

Judd's face broke into a broad grin. "Yuh've got one, Al," he said. "I had one cartridge. I thought yuh'd need it worse with that leg than I would."

Al fell wearily forward over his arrow pierced leg and laughed weakly. "Judd," he said quietly, "look under the hammer of my gun."

Almost involuntarily, Judd dropped his gaze and lifted the hammer of Al's pistol. His mouth dropped open and he stared at Al in amazement when he saw an unfired cartridge there!

[*Turn to page 102*]

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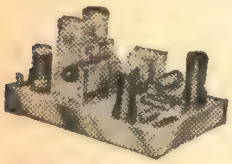

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Then he realized it all suddenly. When he rolled away from Al to put his one cartridge in his gun, Al hadn't been merely fiddling with his own weapon, he had been doing the same! The two men looked at each other for a long moment, the escaping Apaches forgotten, and an understanding sprang up between them and grew to tie them like a strong, thick cord. The eyes of both grew a little shiny and Al said gruffly.

"I thought yuh were a pretty poor scout when yuh said yuh were empty."

But Judd knew that the other man was lying in his teeth. Al had felt exactly the same way he had, when he thought Al was out of ammunition.

Simultaneously, both men remembered the Indians and raised their guns in their hands. With the same accord, they both lowered them and looked again at each other.

Judd summed up the feeling between them when he said harshly, "Don't look at me like that. Yuh know as well as I do that it'll make a right good souvenir!"

FEUD BUSTERS

(Continued from page 90)

Now we can git back to our old business of screenin' gravel whilst we cuss fat Willie Weehaw an' Bosco Bates."

About then High Pockets MaGee pulls in his wagon beside camp, reaches down an' holds up a gallon jug. "Something Bosco Bates sent out to you boys with his best wishes," said High Pockets. "Do I git an invite to the party?"

"Come a-runnin' with that jug, High Pockets," whoops Puggy. "You shore do git an invite. An' Bosco, I take back all the mean things I say about you. You're still the best sheriff in seven states!"

●

NEXT ISSUE

SULTANS OF SWAT

Another Cactus City Story

by L. P. Holmes

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 10)

the build of the Angus, and excellent beef cattle.

The Kleeburgs have invented their own mammoth bulldozer type of clearing machine, which is big enough and powerful enough to uproot the largest mesquite trees like a plow uprooting common weeds. With this machine they can clear two or three acres of mesquite in a day and they have sowed a new kind of grass, adapted to the soil and climate, on thousands of acres of the ranch, and this land, so cleared and sowed, is worth more for grazing than three or four acres of the old wild grass land.

The King Ranch is a great ranch and it is also situated in a great state. The state of Texas contains more than one hundred and seventy-five million acres of land and a great wealth of natural resources. In 1872, settlers from other states were going to Texas at a rate of two or three thousand per week. In 1850, the population of Texas was only 212,592. In 1860 it had increased to 604,215 and in 1870 to 888,579, and today it must be close to three million.

Travel to Texas

Each week several thousands of people now go to Texas, on pleasure, business or to make their homes there. They go by plane, train and auto, but in those early days, about the time that the King Ranch was founded, they came by horseback, oxcart, or prairie schooner, and there was a time when the tax rolls of other states, or the accounts of some merchants' books where the debt was considered as uncollectable, bore the notation G T T, which meant Gone to Texas. For it was a habit of deadbeats in debt and those who had committed crimes to the extent that their home locality was unhealthy, to go to Texas, and during those times in Texas it was considered very bad taste to ask a man why he came there.

I remember a story that has often been told about a group of men rounding up cattle in Texas. One night around the campfire one man proposed a kind of experience or confidence meeting in which each man was to tell why he came to Texas.

The stories were told by one and then an-

[*Turn page*]

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other, stories of crimes committed that caused them to leave their homes back in the states and come to Texas, until all had been told except one, and when it came his turn the silent one said: "Well, fellows, you are going to be surprised when I tell you that I came to Texas to keep from building a church."

The group could hardly believe this and when they asked him to explain, he said: "I was a preacher and my congregation made up money with which to build a church. The money was turned over to me and I either had to build the church or come to Texas, and I had wanted to come to Texas for a long time, so I just kept the money for my own use and came to Texas."

Kit Carson

Now that we have dipped into Texas, and explored a little on the great King Ranch, let's take the trails westward and as we follow those trails we are reminded of a great Western character, who broke many trails of the West, an ideal Western character whose name will live on and on. He was Christopher Carson, better known as Kit Carson. He was born in Madison county, Kentucky, on the 24th of December, 1809. His family, however, moved to Missouri when he was but a year old, and this caused many writers to record his birth as being in Missouri.

At the time the Carsons moved to Missouri, it was called upper Louisiana, being a part of the territory ceded to the United States by France in 1803. It did not become a separate state until 1821. At that time it was a wild raw country, abounding in wild game and Indians who were often hostile.

Kit's father was a farmer and hunter and their home was a sort of block-house or fort as a precaution against Indian attacks. When just a child Kit Carson was taught the use of firearms. He lived in the presence of danger, and it was but natural that he disliked being apprenticed as a saddle maker at the age of fifteen. Saddle-making was not exciting enough for this young adventurer, who had already gained a reputation of being one of the finest shots in the entire country.

He Fought for Keeps!

Abandoning the trade of saddle-making, Kit joined a band of armed traders bound

for Santa Fe, New Mexico, and made the trip across the then wilderness from St. Louis to Santa Fe. Traveling with traders in different parts of the West and down into Mexico, Kit Carson by the time he was 19 years old was known throughout the country as a guide or scout, as a brave young man always ready to help anyone in distress, as one who would not hesitate to swing his unerring guns on the side of right and justice.

But he was not one who would kill if it could be avoided. There was nothing vicious in his makeup. He fought only when a fight could not be prevented, but when he did fight he fought for keeps!

In his early youth before his trip West Carson had become an expert hunter and trapper and along with trading he continued to trap in the West, and once while he was trapping with a party under a man named Fitzpatrick, the camp was robbed of a number of horses by a band of sixty Crow Indians. With a party of only twelve men Carson took up the trail of the Indians, and came upon them in one of their strongholds. He cut loose the animals, which were tied with-

[*Turn page*]

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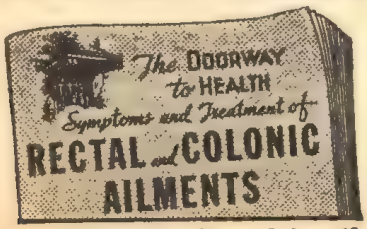

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in ten feet of the fort of logs in which the enemy had taken shelter, attacked the Indians, killed five of their warriors, and made good his retreat with the recovered horses.

Not Foolhardy

While he was a brave man, Carson never allowed what some might call bravery to cause him to be foolhardy or too reckless. He was not too proud to run when he knew the odds were too great for anything like a successful fight. This was shown on one occasion when he and just one other man of his trapping party, while out looking for beaver signs, came suddenly upon a band of about sixty heavily-armed Indians. In the presence of such a force Carson knew it would be folly to fight. Their only safety was in flight and amid a shower of bullets from the Indian rifles, they made good their escape.

Nor was that the only time that Carson ran from a foe. Once, while trapping, he left the camp late one evening on foot to kill some game for dinner, or supper as the trappers called the evening meal. He had just killed an elk when two grizzly bears came suddenly upon him. His rifle being empty, there was no way of escape from almost instant death, but to run with his utmost speed for the nearest tree. He reached a sapling with the bears just at his heels.

Cutting off a limb of the tree with his knife, he used that as his only weapon of defense. When the bears climbed so as nearly to reach him, he would rap them on the noses with his stick, which sent them away a short distance, growling; but when the pain ceased, they would return again only to have the raps repeated.

In this way nearly the whole night was spent, but finally the bears became discouraged and retired from the contest.

Waiting until the bears were well out of sight, Carson descended from the sapling, found that his elk had been devoured by wolves, returned to his camp and made a breakfast of beaver meat, which he had grown tired of, but which, since he had missed supper, made a very appetizing breakfast.

A Battle With a Bully

Perhaps the most outstanding incident to show the true bravery and character of Kit Carson was his shooting of a Canadian bully

at a trading post. This bully was always stirring up trouble between the Indians and the traders at the post. He was bad when he was sober and worse when intoxicated, and many who frequented the trading post were afraid of him.

Carson had disliked the man from their first meeting, but had endured the fellow's bullying actions for the sake of peace. There came a time when the bully, intoxicated, was boasting of his exploits, and was particularly insolent and insulting toward all Americans, whom he described as being fit only to be whipped like slaves. Carson was in the crowd and stepped forward, saying: "I am an American, the most inconsiderable one among them, but if you wish to die I will accept your challenge."

The bully, who was sitting on a horse, with his loaded rifle in his hand, defied Kit. Carson leaped upon his horse with a loaded pistol, and both rushed into close combat. They fired almost at the same moment, but Carson's shot was just a fraction of an instant ahead of that of his antagonist. The bully's bullet just grazed Carson's cheek, cutting off a lock of his hair. Carson's bullet entered the man's hand, came out at the wrist, and passed through his arm above the elbow. The bully begged for his life and it was spared. Carson could just as well have killed the bully with that first shot, but he wanted to teach the fellow to respect his fellowmen, and it was his intention from the first shot not to kill the man unless forced to do so.

No pioneer in the pages of our Western history ever endured greater hardships and survived them than did Kit Carson with the Fremont expeditions, when men of the expedition, caught in the fastnesses of the mountains ate their starving mules. While some committed suicide and others froze, Carson, always courageous, always trying to help his comrades, lived through those hardships

[*Turn page*]

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and retained his remarkable personality, came through still loving life, nature and adventure.

We who now enjoy living in comfort in the great West, once a vast wilderness, owe much to Kit Carson and other brave pioneers like him who helped win the West to civilization. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE Diamond Cross roundup camp was silent while the storm built up in the hills. Thunder rumbled and roared in the craggy granite ridges in the distance. Intermittent flashes of lightning struck fantastic reflections from the hidden cores of various minerals held in the rocks.

Still far away, the storm seemed to be rolling on clanging wheels toward the camp, the sound of its fury striking first in the great irregular crater of Moonstone Valley and then slipping through the mouth of the little dog-leg hollow that held the Diamond Cross herd.

The cowboys around the campfire sat with tense backs and solemn faces, staring soberly into the flickering flames. Fear and foreboding seemed to hover over their thoughts.

Old Cap Maxwell, the big rawboned owner of the Diamond Cross Ranch, was aware of their silence and their preoccupation, and

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he tried to hide the uneasiness in his own weathered face when the men lifted an occasional glance toward him. He knew it was not the gathering storm which had killed the usual round of talk at tonight's campfire. It was something far more deadly, and it worried him.

And with that opening, gals and galluses, you're right up in the sixth row center seats for another exciting Masked Rider drama of the rangeland. This one is by Hascal Giles, and it's titled MAD MAN OF MOONSTONE.

There's everything in it that you have come to expect of these grand Wayne Morgan novels, and just reading the opening paragraphs above will convince you that the shadow of mighty bad trouble lay over the Moonstone Valley. And to *The Masked Rider* bad trouble drew like a mustard plaster.

Just a further sampling of this great yarn:

There was lightning in the skies that night, above the uneasy herd, and the growing rumble of sky artillery. But the real threat lay in man-made scheming, not in the skies, and this black, storm-studded night was made for treachery. This herd meant so much to old Cap Maxwell. He had to market it in order to pay various stockholders who had lost money in the failure of a gold mine he had sponsored. They trusted him, and he was resolved not to fail them.

But, less than two miles from this bedded herd and these worried men was the spot where Maxwell's two square-shooting partners, Grady Sloan and Thad Tate, had been killed—by a killer who still ran free. Would Maxwell be next? It seemed very likely he would.

The stage was set for all hell to break loose—and it did. But the long-expected blow against the Diamond Cross came so swiftly, and in such an unexpected way, that for a moment Maxwell's tongue could find no words. Then he yelled to Whit Berry, his young foreman.

"Whit, look! Look over there!"

A chorus of yells drowned the rancher's voice, for they all saw it at once. One moment the narrow pocket of the granite-rimmed valley was as black as pitch. The next instant, a brilliant red flare broke through the darkness on Cap Maxwell's left, appearing first against the blue-white rocks of the steep ridge behind them.

Red tongues of flame leaped skyward like bloody lances, competing with the flashing lightning in their brilliance. The scarlet streak moved on, racing swiftly toward the mouth of the hollow, firing brush and sage in a wavering red line as it flew past the herd.

Almost at the same instant, a similar flare appeared to the right, flitting like a grounded comet through the tender grass and brush which grew thicker there because of the creek. While the startled cowboys gaped in awe, two gleaming streaks of fire sprang to life, stretching from the rocks behind the camp to the mouth of the hollow.

[*Turn page*]

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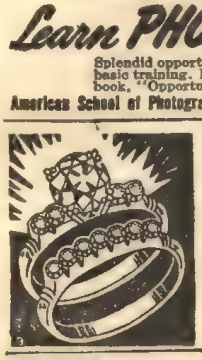

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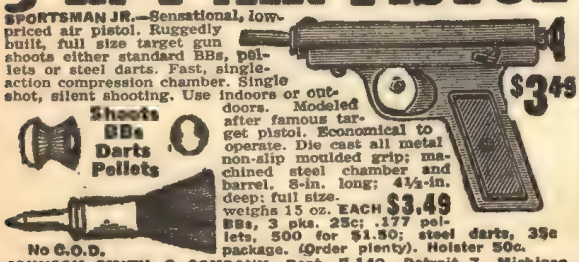

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A wall of flame now crackled hungrily on each side of the camp and of the herd. Toward the south, the fire lines curved like prongs and pressed rapidly together, blocking any escape from the hollow into Moonstone Valley.

"We're trapped!" a cowboy yelled in horror. "Fire on both sides of us. It'll get us all—the cattle, too!"

Well, does that look like a tight spot or doesn't it? From where we sit, it's packed with drama, because while these men sat stunned by the realization that they were completely surrounded by the inferno, the unmistakable rumble of hoofs was clear above the crackle of the growing fire and the muttering thunder of the heavens. The cattle were already moving! There was scorching fire five hundred yards ahead of the trapped men, and half a thousand head of charging, maddened, sharp-horned cattle running in blind terror behind them!

"Whoever's after the bosses of the Nugget Creek Minin' Company won't have nobody to worry about after this, I reckon," Cap Maxwell said tightly. "Looks like we're gonna—"

Maxwell broke off and blinked in amazement as he continued to stare at the raging fire ahead of him. At first he thought hysteria had already laid its grip on him and that his eyes were taunting him. The thought of supernatural things almost found its way into his mind again, for, silhouetted against that menacing red wall, were two of the strangest horsemen he had ever seen! . . .

You readin' rannihans have one guess as to who the riders were. One, because that's all you'll need. Folks in a tight—bad. Fire all around them. A couple of thousand sharp hoofs on the way to pulp them if the fire didn't get them first. Who comes ridin'? The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk!

But, sure as heck, some of you cynics are going to ask how even the Masked Rider could handle a situation like that. And right here is where we clam up and refuse to tell you. You can just read the story for your-

GIVE TO YOUR RED CROSS!

self! Does Wayne Morgan have things all his own way? Not any! Just to show you, listen to this:

The giant redhead sprang from the ledge like a catapulted rock, over two hundred pounds of wild brute force intent on destroying the man on the horse. Morgan had known it was coming, had dreaded it. He was at a disadvantage in more ways than one. He could not kill the big miner, for a man in Shan Loring's condition could not be held responsible for his actions. On the other hand, if Loring killed Morgan it would be regarded merely as an unfortunate circumstance and the crazed man would receive no punishment. . . .

Crazed man? Sure. Remember the title, MAD MAN OF MOONSTONE. Well — Morgan had little time to think about these things. Shan Loring's immense body slammed into him like a thunderbolt, knocking him out of the saddle and crushing him to the hard ground. Sparks exploded across the cowboy's vision and a roaring waterfall grew up in his head under the shocking impact!

Just one situation of many in this story that will hold you to your chair until you've finished the last word! And the colorful stage bandit, Little Joe—daring, clever, utterly

[*Turn page*]

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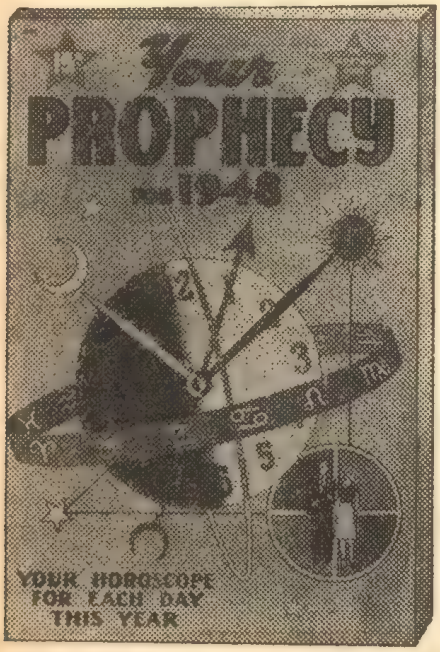

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reckless. Who was Little Joe? Brother, you'll be surprised.

It's all in MAD MAN OF MOONSTONE, in the next issue!

In the next issue, too, is Joe Archibald's fine novelet, HEIR TO GUNSMOKE. Just that title alone should give you an idea of the kind of fast action that is packed into this novelet. But, to get the flavor, sink your teeth in this:

A lot of the past and the present ran through Ben Stuart's mind. He had seconds in which to live, and he knew he'd throw his shot at Mott Geyer. The face of Sally Bonner was limned clear for a moment inside his head and when he struck for his gun he thought of what might have been.

The Colt was clear of leather when a shot boomed somewhere overhead, and as he fired, Vidal pitched headlong down the hotel stairs. Geyer stumbled forward, widened eyes fixed upon the gunman he'd hired, and blood staining the front of his shirt.

Stuart abstractedly felt the numbness crawling up his left leg when Geyer crashed to the floor, his gun sliding away from his fingers. He looked up the stairs and saw the powdersmoke boiling down and he marveled. *I am alive. It is over, and they're both dead.*

That'll give you an idea. Good readin', fellers and gals! And more good reading in the short stories and the departments of the next issue. A big issue—all for you!

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COMES now the office boy with the big mailbag. He holds it open and we dive into it like a prairie dog into his hole with a coyote breathin' on his neck. Sure, we like to get mail. Don't you? We like to read your letters and cards and kind of build up a picture of you writin' em out there. And what you say we take to heart, because that's how we make the magazine more to your liking as time goes on. Leave us, then, see what comes up this time.

I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for a year, and have missed only one copy. I don't think it would be a good idea to let Wayne Morgan fall in love and get married. It would spoil the stories.—*Willma Owen, Bluffton, Alberta.*

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I like your magazine best of all, for I have been in the West.—*(Mrs.) Gussie Raymond, Marshall, Mich.*

I have just finished reading LAND OF BIG TIMBER. It was a swell story.—*Lurene McAllister, West Columbia, S. C.*

Gals—three of 'em. But whoever said the gentler sex didn't read MASKED RIDER WESTERN? All right, waddies, here's a bass voice joining in.

That LAND OF BIG TIMBER was tops alright,
And I could imagine I was in the fight.
Keep right on sending out stories like that,
And you've got one reader, or I'll eat a hat!
—*Homer Ditmars, Crestline, Ohio*

Hey, a poet! Thanks, Homer, for the ditty and for the kind words!

I have just finished reading my first MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Let's have many more of the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk stories. I, too, think Blue Hawk should come out in the open more often. —*(Mrs.) Buddie Slay, Tuscumbia, Ala.*

Mebbe he should. Could be.

I have just read LAND OF BIG TIMBER in the December MASKED RIDER WESTERN. A swell story. My dad and I both read every issue and like it better than any other magazine. We don't want the Masked Rider to marry. That would change everything too much.—*Clyde D. Hutchinson, Rush, Ky.*

Well, Wayne Morgan has held off the women for quite some time, and probably he will keep on doing it—even though the big fellow is mighty attractive to them.

I like your magazine, but I and quite a few others like to read about honest gamblers, such as Watches John Vidlak. Let us have some more about him. —*John Korb, Cleveland, Ohio.*

There were many honest gamblers in the Old West, and some of them were appealing characters. They do make good fiction, don't they, Joe?

And that'll be about all for this time, friends. But let us remind you to make your contribution to this department.

Kindly address The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. A post card will do as well as a sealed letter.

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—THE EDITOR

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